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## Editorial

In this issue of JEBS we are pleased to showcase some of the work of recent PhD graduates from IBTS Centre Amsterdam. The first section comprises three articles by recent graduates. Following this, we present the PhD Dissertation abstracts and short biographies of all eight students who have graduated with IBTS Centre and the Vrije Universiteit since the move to Amsterdam in 2014. This issue also contains eight thought-provoking book reviews.

The first article, by George Bristow, is concerned with ‘Abrahamic dialogue’ and the ‘increasing interest in investigating and utilising the common appeal to Abraham by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in today’s pluralistic world’. Bristow highlights both the potential and the challenges in such dialogue. He recognises that the shared study of such texts can bring about greater understanding among the adherents of the different faiths. He wishes, however, to go further, for he argues that if Christians are to be true to their understanding of Abraham as revealed in the Christian Scriptures, then such interfaith dialogue should include as a goal: ‘Persuasion of dialogue partners to positions different from previously held, including conversion’. He maintains that such a goal is not inconsistent with creating deeper relationships between people of different faiths and is, indeed, necessarily integral to that which may be called Abrahamic dialogue.

In the second article, Rosa Hunt, with a concern to consider what Baptists can learn from God’s revelation in Nature, introduces us to the poetic work of a fourth-century Saint, Ephrem the Syrian. She contends that, according to Ephrem, symbols were one of the three main ways in which God revealed God’s self. Accordingly, the symbols of Nature bear witness to God but, more than that, such symbols are places in which God has hidden some aspect of his divine life. As a consequence, such symbols, as indeed a rose, participate in some way in the divine life they symbolise. Hunt’s work at the very least introduces us to what will be for many a lesser known character. She, however, does more than this, for through Ephrem’s poetry Hunt leads us into a discussion on the hiddenness and ‘revealedness’ of God in Nature. Through this discussion we are invited to consider what can be known of God through meditating on Nature, with the attendant proper caution about claiming too much with respect to the mystery of the Divine.

In the third article, Mike Pears encourages us to think about mission and place. This involves recognising that places are laden with ‘many layered and complex sets of meaning and constructions of power’. These meanings and constructions may give the impression of creating a safe place. This is

how some may conceive the Biblical Eden. Contrary to this, however, such places are often established through hierarchies and exclusion. In contrast, Pears offers Peter's experience at Caesarea, as recorded in Acts 10, as representing the 'inauguration of an entirely new spatial imagination' which transforms both Peter and Cornelius. From this perspective and with helpful illustration, readers are encouraged to become self-critical of the spatial arrangements in which they live and operate every day and to participate with the Spirit in living in 'new-creational spaces'.

**Revd Dr Stuart Blythe (Editor)**



# How Abrahamic is 'Abrahamic Dialogue'?<sup>1</sup>

George Bristow

## Introduction

Burgeoning efforts in so-called 'Abrahamic dialogue' reflect increasing interest in investigating and utilising the common appeal to Abraham by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in today's pluralistic world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their roots to Abraham. Parks documents how Abraham has been seen as 'the first Jew' by Jewish writers, as 'the first Christian' by Christians and as 'the first Muslim' by Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Each tradition has at times claimed unique or even exclusive rights to the patriarch. The Qur'an takes note of these competing claims, addressing itself to Jews and Christians:

People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed until after his time? Do you not understand? God knows and you do not. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian (Q 3:65-67).

Ancient Abrahamic traditions have thus been utilised to foster both positive relationships and deep interfaith conflict. Kuschel describes this as a 'family dispute' in which 'each of the three faiths believes that it has preserved the paternal or maternal heritage in the purest form'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in spite of this ongoing dispute, many today believe that Abrahamic identity opens up common ground that should be cultivated for the common good. For example, Moyaert holds that 'Interreligious dialogue is the place where we can listen to the stories of religious others and enter their world.'<sup>4</sup> Jewish writer Kogan draws attention to the way distinct identities have developed from the Genesis Abraham narrative: 'That these [biblical] stories, *differently interpreted* (as they are in Christianity), or *differently told* (as they

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from chapter 1 of George Bristow, *Sharing Abraham?: Narrative Worldview, Biblical and Qur'anic Interpretation and Comparative Theology in Turkey* (Cambridge, Mass: Doorlight Academic, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> D. R. Parks, 'Abraham, the 'First Christian' and the 'First Muslim': Hermeneutics of a Religious Symbol in Western Christianity and Sunni Islam' (PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987). See also Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter, *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1995), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Marianne Moyaert, 'Interreligious dialogue and the debate between universalism and particularism: searching for a way out of the deadlock', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (2005), p. 15.

are in Islam), have become part of the core narrative of two related faiths attests to their profundity and their power.’<sup>5</sup>

Abrahamic dialogue must be clearly distinguished from the larger field of which it is a subset. This distinction is not always adequately addressed in theologies of religion which appeal to the natural revelation common to all peoples or common paternity as God’s creatures.<sup>6</sup> The claim to possession of Abrahamic roots puts the issue on a different footing. Because of competing claims of special revelation, this dialogue is inextricably linked with what has been called *scriptures in dialogue* and the complex issues of *scriptural intertextuality*. Responsible study of our respective Scriptures is an imperative for this type of dialogue.

## Abraham and Ecumenical Unity

Abraham is frequently recruited as a key ally in efforts to bring about peace and mutual understanding among conflicted groups and nations. Josua notes (though with evident concern) that many voices proclaim that ‘the three monotheistic religions should leave behind their competition up to now, reflect instead about their mutual father figure Abraham, and bear witness of intellectual and moral values to an increasingly areligious and unjust world’.<sup>7</sup> Efforts of this sort are seen especially in places where pluralism and globalism have brought communities of different faith traditions into close contact. Catholic scholar Valkenberg recounts the benefits of his interfaith encounters with Turkish Muslims in the Netherlands:

[This dialogue can] contribute to a form of God-talk in which Muslims and Christians may share their traditions as mutual incitements to a broader understanding of God... European Christians have a lot to learn from the strangers who are our interlocutors in these dialogues.<sup>8</sup>

In a western academic context, the ‘Oxford Abrahamic Group’ brings together Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars with a goal of deepening mutual understanding of respective Abrahamic scriptures and traditions. Winter introduces a work by members of this group with optimism about the future of interfaith cordiality: ‘Today, despite the headlines, and the heated rhetoric of fundamentalist preachers on all sides, it is reasonable to claim that

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<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Kogan, ‘Abrahamic Faith: Calling and Response in Jewish Narrative Theology’, in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts*, ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean, and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 99-114 (p. 96).

<sup>6</sup> Models for a Christian theology of religions are examined by Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Hanna N. Josua, ‘Tbrahim, Khalil Allah: Eine Anfrage an Die Abrahamische Ökumene’ (PhD Dissertation, Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät, 2005), p. 585.

<sup>8</sup> Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. xiv-xv.



most Abrahamic believers find themselves on slowly convergent paths.’<sup>9</sup> The scholars involved do acknowledge that there are no shortcuts in this process. Such initiatives are ‘most likely to succeed where the theology insists on the integrity of each religion, and refuses the logic of syncretism or relativism. Abraham’s God, after all, is a God of truth, whose demands are absolute.’<sup>10</sup> As I will argue, such integrity demands careful comparative theological reflection on the respective Abraham narratives.

Faith-based initiatives for peace are attractive because of what Breiner describes as the perceived ‘efficacy of religious faith to deal with contemporary problems’.<sup>11</sup> Some initiatives show that Abrahamic commonality can be a basis for bringing people together on a local level. For example, one report examines texts in each tradition that seem to support violence, and then focuses on other perspectives within these traditions which can promote ‘Abrahamic alternatives to war’ such as teachings and ethical imperatives within their sacred texts.<sup>12</sup> Sheridan finds such an opportunity in Genesis 25.9 where Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together. She argues that the text ‘may well found the basis for a new look at the role of Ishmael’.<sup>13</sup>

However, many of these efforts to ground peace-making in the Abraham narrative are unconvincing. For example, Sensenig contrasts Abraham’s ‘peace-making paradigm’ with Israel’s subsequent history: ‘The violent seeds of conquest sown by Joshua’s ‘scorched earth’ crusade in this Promised Land ultimately bore the bitter fruit of a flawed and failed mini-empire, the Davidic monarchy.’<sup>14</sup> Although it is true that Abraham’s and Isaac’s relationships with their neighbours were largely characterised by peaceful co-existence (e.g. the Philistine acknowledgement that ‘We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us’ Genesis 26.28; cf. 21.22-23), nevertheless to contrast this neighbourly interaction with the post-Exodus conquest of the land and destruction of its inhabitants by Israel’s armies under Joshua’s leadership is a questionable move, effectively ignoring the repeated promise of God to the patriarchs that he will give this land to their offspring (Genesis 12.7; 13.15;

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<sup>9</sup> T. J. Winter, 'Introduction', in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*, ed. by Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> B. Breiner, 'Christian-Muslim Relations: Some Current Themes', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2 (1991), p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite and Glen Stassen, 'Abrahamic Alternatives to War: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on Just Peacemaking' (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), pp. 1-20 (p. 1).

<sup>13</sup> Sybil Sheridan, 'Abraham from a Jewish Perspective', in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*, ed. by Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 9-17 (p. 16).

<sup>14</sup> Kent Davis Sensenig, 'An Abrahamic Paradigm for Just Peacemaking', *Theology, News and Notes*, 56 (Spring 2009), 3/6.

15.18-21; 17.3, 8; 26.3; 28.13). Such a move also ignores the specific notices made in the Genesis narrative of just such a future destruction of Abraham's present neighbours, who are presented as 'wicked, great sinners against the LORD' (13.13; cf. 18.20). While judgment will wait 400 years because 'the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete' (Genesis 15.13-16), this moral and religious corruption explains the drastic measures Joshua will take. Note also Joshua's warning to Israel that their end will be similar to the previous inhabitants of the land (Joshua 24.19-20).

Using scriptural teaching on humanity's common identity as *created* by God may have far more potential for furthering peace and justice than using Abraham as a common source of faith. Goodwin points to successful efforts in which 'religious leaders refer to the purposes of God for all humanity as set out in the creation narratives, and thereby expose exclusivist national ideologies as narrow and artificial constructions'.<sup>15</sup> Common humanity is a less problematic bond than so-called Abrahamic faith, for reasons which will become increasingly apparent as we proceed.

## Challenges to Abrahamic Ecumenism

Simplistic claims that all religions are essentially the same are neither sustainable nor helpful. While the claim that all religions are one may be well-intentioned, as Prothero insists, it is 'neither accurate nor ethically responsible'.<sup>16</sup> Turkish theologian Ramazan Hurç argues that using Abraham as the basis for such dialogue is inadequate because the Qur'an clearly warns against it, citing the reminder in Q 3:65-67 that the scriptural books (Torah, Injil and Qur'an) were revealed after Abraham. He points out that Muslims cannot leave these books, especially the Qur'an, out of the discussion as if Abraham by himself were a basis for dialogue.<sup>17</sup>

Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman's call for some sort of coming together on a common platform provides an example of this difficulty:

Religiously speaking, the high place that the Qur'an accords to the religious personalities of Abraham, Moses and others should provide an adequate basis for mutual understanding and cooperation, even though the Qur'an rejects Jewish particularism and has universalized monotheism and divine guidance, which every human being can share equally.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen R. Goodwin, 'Fractured Land, Healing Nations: A Contextual Analysis of the Role of Religious Faith Sodalities Towards Peace-Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina' (PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005), p. 271.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen R. Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World - and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ramazan Hurç, 'Dinler Arası Diyalog Bağlamında Hz. Muhammed'in Hristiyanlarla İlişkileri (Muhammad's Relationships with Christians in the Context of Inter-Religious Dialogue)', *Firat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (Euphrates University Journal of Social Science)*, 12 (2002), p. 392.

<sup>18</sup> Fazlur Rahman, 'Islam's Attitude toward Judaism', *Muslim World*, 72 (1980), p. 13.

But what Rahman calls 'Jewish particularism' is one of the most sweeping aspects of the biblical worldview expressed not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament. While Israel's God is the God of all humankind (e.g. Romans 3.29-30), the biblical story traces a particular relationship with the Jewish nation as the channel of universal blessing. The New Testament makes it clear that, as Jesus said, 'salvation is from the Jews' (John 4.22). In a passing comment Paul sums up the relationship of Gentile believers to Jewish believers by saying: 'the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings' (Romans 15.27 cf. 9.3-5; 11.11-24; Ephesians 2.11-22). When the respective scriptures on Abraham are included in the discussion, we are faced with differences that make the common ground harder to find. From a Christian standpoint, the importance of Abraham cannot be separated from the unique and particular story of Israel which culminates in Jesus the Messiah.

From a Muslim perspective, scholars like Sachedina wrestle with the problem that the Qur'an seems to provide support both for religious pluralism and for exclusivism or absolutism toward other religions.<sup>19</sup> Pluralism can be argued based on a verse speaking of humanity as one community (Q 2:213). But the doctrine of the 'supersession' of previous Abrahamic revelations, as a necessary result of the emergence of Muhammad, negates recognition of other religions' claims as legitimate ways of salvation. The primary way of resolving the apparent contradiction between qur'anic pluralism and exclusivism has been to argue that verses that may support toleration have been abrogated by verses that call for combating unbelief.<sup>20</sup> Sachedina claims that 'the principal problem that modern Muslim scholars face is deciding whether or not to accept the judgement of past scholars that qur'anic verses which deal with interfaith relations have been abrogated'.<sup>21</sup>

Hashmi firmly rejects 'the notion of abrogation as an interpretive tool of the first resort'.<sup>22</sup> He argues that when the Qur'an is read as an integrated whole, 'the apparently belligerent verses emerge as limited in scope and application while an ethic of pluralism (best expressed in Q. 5:48) is consistently upheld'.<sup>23</sup> He interprets the qur'anic position as simultaneously calling various faith communities to Islam and assessing their distinctive paths as part of God's will: 'All religion (*din*) is one, but the specific rules,

<sup>19</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'The Qur'an and Other Religions', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 291-309 (p. 301).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>22</sup> Sohail H. Hashmi, 'The Qur'an and Tolerance: An Interpretive Essay on Verse 5:48', *Journal of Human Rights*, 2 (2003), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 81. In fact he asserts that in this verse, 'the Qur'an affirms that the problem of religious and moral diversity is not a hindrance to be overcome, but an advantage to be embraced – a necessary facet of God's unknown plan for humanity' (p. 101).

norms, guidelines, laws (shari'a) for each community may vary.'<sup>24</sup> However, the distinction at issue is more than a questions of rules and laws (paths within the one religion), but rather concerns deeper matters of worldview rooted in the main storylines of each faith.

Karl-Josef Kuschel builds a systematic argument for an Abrahamic *ecumene* in which, as he puts it, 'Jews, Christians and Muslims are prepared to stop dismissing one another with polemic as 'unbelievers', 'apostates', or 'superseded'; in other words [treating one another] as brothers and sisters, in faith in the God of Abraham'.<sup>25</sup> I question three areas of his argument. First, his explanation of Abraham and Christianity is particularly unconvincing, especially in explaining the beginning of Christianity after Israel's failure to 'convert' under Jesus of Nazareth's teaching. He says, 'Taking up a belief in the resurrection of the dead which had been widespread since the time of apocalyptic, Jesus' followers could not give up their conviction that the crucified Jesus was alive.'<sup>26</sup> This is a seriously mistaken reading of the origins of the Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection as seen in the New Testament, which is inseparable from its understanding of Abraham.<sup>27</sup>

Kuschel's second questionable assertion is that 'in John we are confronted with the first exclusive Christianization of Abraham... Johannine pre-existence christology is the keystone in an argument about the exclusive truth needed for the Christian truth finally to be able to triumph over Jewish truth.'<sup>28</sup> However, from the standpoint of the New Testament, the problem is not Christian exclusion of Israel but Israel's rejection of the 'son' of Israel's God. Jesus made this inescapable in the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21.33-46). That Jesus was the Son of God is at the heart of the common New Testament kerygma.<sup>29</sup>

Thirdly, Kuschel too readily links *Ishmael* directly with the religion of *Islam* rather than with Ishmael's *Arab* descendants. By contrast, Arab Christian scholar Maalouf traces Ishmael through biblical history to argue that the oracle given to Hagar that Ishmael would dwell 'in the proximity/presence' of his brethren (Genesis 16.12) was a 'word of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Kuschel, pp. xvi-xvii. Yet the Genesis narrative underscores the reality that in God's purposes Ishmael and Isaac cannot share the inheritance. Not much peace and understanding are seen between Sarah and Hagar.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> See chapter 4 of Bristow.

<sup>28</sup> Kuschel, pp. 115-16.

<sup>29</sup> Bristow, pp. 77-79. The 'dominant approach' to John's Gospel assumed uncritically by Kuschel, which sets John at odds with the Synoptics and with history, is seriously challenged by Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The claim of anti-Judaic attitudes in the fourth Gospel is refuted by Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Instituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), pp. 36-38.

integration rather than a word of alienation and hostility as is often believed'.<sup>30</sup> He notes that Ishmael's descendants were an integral part of the restoration promises of Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 42.1-10; 60.1-7; etc.). In light of the biblical outworking of the Ishmael oracles, claims of fulfilment in Islam are weak at best.<sup>31</sup>

Muslim arguments for Abrahamic religious ecumenism based on common *ethical monotheism* are somewhat more plausible than efforts to make the biblical Abraham serve these interests. Nevertheless, as we will see, this is done at the expense of the overall biblical narrative which ties Abraham specifically to Israel and indeed to Jesus. An example of such a 'generic Muslim' Abraham argument is expressed by Delorenzo:

It is not a matter of favor won by an individual and passed on to others, so that a favored family develops and extends itself into a tribe, a community, a nation, a race... From the very outset, beginning with Ibrahim... this notion was put to rest... True guidance is God's guidance, and it is to be found in all the scriptures He revealed to humankind for their moral and spiritual edification... Forget the labels! Forget the pedigrees!<sup>32</sup>

Such an approach to common identity is problematic for Jews whose scriptures are unequivocal on Abraham's multiplication by God into the nation of Israel. It is just as problematic for Christians, whose founding documents not only affirm God's choice of Israel, but also redefine monotheism by including Jesus in the identity of Israel's God,<sup>33</sup> thus focusing the possibility of human beings' reconciliation with God on the singular divine intervention in Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

Christian supporters of Abrahamic ecumenism are often critical of their own tradition's appropriation of Abraham. For example, Pulcini questions the validity of the interpretation of Abraham found in the New Testament: 'Christianity re-interpreted the figure of Abraham to accommodate its needs... Why was Christ the only descendent to whom the promises applied?'<sup>35</sup> He ignores the appropriation of the Abraham tradition

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<sup>30</sup> Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel (Academic & Professional), 2003), pp. 217-18.

<sup>31</sup> See the detailed study by Jonathan Culver, 'The Ishmael Promises in the Light of God's Mission: Christian and Muslim Reflections' (PhD Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Yusuf Talal Delorenzo, 'Ibrahim: A Family Portrait', in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts*, ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean, and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 129-37 (p. 134).

<sup>33</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> For an argument that there are no insuperable barriers to believing that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, see Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 1st edn (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 143. See however the critical review by Imad Shehadeh, 'Review of Miroslav Volf. Allah: A Christian Response', *Themelios*, 36 (2011).

<sup>35</sup> Theodore Pulcini, 'Of Flesh and Faith: Abraham as a Principle of Inclusion and Exclusion in Christian Thought', in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts*, ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean,

by Jesus himself and apparently sees no importance in Jews receiving or rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. In Pulcini's view, Gentiles should be admitted into the Abrahamic line of blessing by faith in Christ, while Jews should be seen as already there without Christ. This wholesale jettisoning of the uniqueness, universality, and finality of Jesus as Lord and Messiah is found in many Christian efforts to widen the Abrahamic umbrella. Kuschel, for example, reduces Paul's Abraham theology to the following formula:

Gentiles who believe in Christ become children of Abraham in the spiritual sense. Children of Abraham after the flesh, the Jews, remain children of Abraham by following the faith of Abraham, which is not trust in the 'works of the law' but trust in a God who calls into being that which is not and thus breaks through and surpasses all earthly, human, criteria and expectations.'<sup>36</sup>

Yet for Paul (consistent with the entire apostolic canon) there is no such difference: Jews, who have rejected Jesus as Messiah, are only 'saved' and grafted back into the Abrahamic olive tree as they confess Jesus as risen Lord, just as Gentiles must (Romans 9.1; 10.1, 9-13; 11.23). Such suppression of biblical evidence is troubling. While the recruitment of Abraham as a neutral father figure in the effort to build and maintain peace arises from laudable intentions, much of what is written stumbles over the contradictory uses to which he is put. The approaches to Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are deeply different and at many points incompatible.

These challenges to Abrahamic dialogue make it clear that bringing the respective scriptures (the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Qur'an) into careful comparative encounter is essential. Study of these scriptures yields resources for peaceful interchange and clarifies areas of deeper difference that must be respected. Some models of dialogue intentionally focus on the mutual use of these Scriptures, specifically efforts to bring about encounter between Christians and Muslims through reading and discussion of their own and each other's Scriptures.

Efforts in scriptural dialogue follow two different models: (1) those that seek a common scriptural basis for understanding differences and resolving conflicts; and (2) scriptural reasoning efforts that seek to enlighten and/or persuade those whose scriptures both overlap and differ from our own.

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and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 115-28 (pp. 115, 17).

<sup>36</sup> Kuschel, p. 90. For a recent survey of many of these issues, especially in post-Holocaust European Christian thinking, see Istvan Tatai, *The Church and Israel: In Search of a New Model in Post-Holocaust Theology* (Printed by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

## Scriptural Dialogue to Resolve Conflict

Taking the first approach, we find an increasing amount of written work produced by scholars interacting with each other's texts, such as the *Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* compiled by the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>37</sup> We also find Christian and Muslim leaders/scholars in public forum dialogue, such as the Doha 'building bridges' seminar in 2003 convened by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, which was an exercise in Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together.<sup>38</sup>

Universities increasingly offer opportunities for such scriptural encounter. For example, the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies (CMCS) aims to facilitate student dialogue over scriptures.<sup>39</sup> This is not an easy process, as readers of texts bring their own presuppositions to their reading. Nevertheless, it is vital for Christians and Muslims to understand each other's scriptures and take their differences as well as similarities seriously.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the most significant reflection on this approach comes from 'Scriptural Reasoning' (SR) movements, which pursue the practice of group reading and interacting with the Abrahamic scriptures. While its description as a 'wisdom-seeking engagement with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures' points to a broader goal than conflict resolution narrowly defined,<sup>41</sup> this approach seems primarily addressed to the present Islam-West situation of conflict and the public square. Kepnes puts the goal of inter-religious conflict resolution this way:

SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world.<sup>42</sup>

The methodology is designed to bring into existence long-lasting arrangements in which conversations are held jointly around these three scriptures and interpretive traditions. Small groups gather from time to time to read and interpret selected texts, operating with a 'three-way mutual

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<sup>37</sup> See Brian M. Hauglid, 'On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad', in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. by John C. Reeves (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 87-105.

<sup>38</sup> See Michael Ipgrave, *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together: A Record of the Seminar 'Building Bridges' Held at Doha, Qatar, 7-9 April 2003* (London: Church House Pub., 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Ida J. Glaser and Gregory M. Anderson, 'Building Respect, Seeking Truth: Towards a Model for Muslim-Christian Dialogue', *Christian Scholar's Review*, 34 (2005). See the vision and ethos of the CMCS at <<http://cmcsoxford.org.uk/about-us/ethos/>> [accessed 08 March 2018]

<sup>40</sup> See Ida J. Glaser, 'Toward a Mutual Understanding of Christian and Islamic Concepts of Revelation', *Themelios*, 7 (1982), p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> David F. Ford, 'An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims', *Modern Theology*, 22 (2006), p. 345.

<sup>42</sup> Steven Kepnes, 'A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology*, 22 (2006), p. 367.

*hospitality*: each is host to the others and guest to the others as each welcomes the other two to their ‘home’ scripture and its traditions of interpretation’.<sup>43</sup> In an interesting comment that sheds light on the model as it is being practised, Ford says that ‘the rabbinic debates around scripture in the Talmud... are probably the nearest traditional equivalent to scriptural reasoning’.<sup>44</sup>

As one guideline for scriptural reasoning Ford proposes, ‘Be open to *mutual hospitality turning into friendship* – each tradition values friendship, and for it to happen now might be seen as the most tangible anticipation of future peace.’<sup>45</sup> Experience in Turkey has shown me that friendship is possible with Muslims who do not share my convictions, even though they are aware of my work as a missionary-theologian (the Turkish term *misyoner* is historically and politically loaded and provokes strong reactions). Peaceful neighbourly relations are possible among those of differing faith commitments, though usually the subject of religion and scriptures is avoided. Friendship works on a human level, especially when working together in job or community situations. The *institutional* setting opens possibilities for such structured, intentional scriptural dialogue in ways perhaps not so possible in day-to-day living or in familiar religious places of worship. In whatever setting, pursuing this intentionally requires a small group committed to reading together with some set of guidelines like the above.

Ford comments that ‘Scriptural reasoning does not encourage anyone to become an ‘expert’ in scriptural reasoning, as if it were possible to know all three scriptures and their traditions of interpretation in a specialist mode.’<sup>46</sup> Adherents of each tradition have *their own* scriptures: Jews have the Tanakh, Christians have the New Testament, and Muslims have the Qur’an. But this assumption of ‘ownership’ is problematic for Christian readers who receive the Tanakh in its present form as the Word of God and read it as *their own* scripture (not that of the ‘other’) along with the New Testament. The situation differs for the Jewish or Muslim reader. Judaism receives neither the New Testament nor the Qur’an as divine Scripture given by the one creator God of Israel; Islam affirms books given to Moses and Jesus but generally denies that the canonical scriptures (Tanakh and New Testament) are continuous with those original books in any meaningful way. But Christians, especially perhaps Jewish Christians, affirm the right to ‘host’ the Tanakh/Old Testament as equal heirs with Judaism, although this right is contested by many Jewish readers who consider the New Testament

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<sup>43</sup> Ford, p. 349.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>45</sup> Ford, ‘An Interfaith Wisdom’, pp. 349-50.

<sup>46</sup> Ford, p. 357.



reading of the Tanakh to be a deviant interpretation.<sup>47</sup> Yet the Tanakh was the only scripture known and used by Jesus and his earliest followers. When the Jewish-Christian apostles speak of 'the sacred writings' and 'all scripture', they are referring to the Tanakh (II Timothy 3.15-16). Christians and Jews diverge from one another over two readings of the same scriptures.<sup>48</sup> This complicates the scriptural reasoning process. Who is the 'host' of the Tanakh? Does SR require Christians to surrender it to Jews?

Nevertheless, with the caveat that Christians claim the whole 'Bible', it seems reasonable that the adherents of each tradition be recognised as the authoritative interpreters of their own scriptures. Thus Jews represent Judaism's positions, Christians represent Christianity's position, and Muslims represent Islam's positions when explaining their relative readings of the scriptures in question.

At the end of a special issue of *Modern Theology* devoted to SR, Daniel Hardy asks:

How can we target the deepest suppositions of the Abrahamic traditions: the patterns of the activity of the Divine, the highest reaches of humanity (reason, passion, compassionate care, love, justice, social well-being, etc.) to which we are abductively attracted by the Divine?<sup>49</sup>

But what does 'Abrahamic' mean here? What joins these three faiths in a common set and separates them from other world faiths? Presumably it is the doctrine of monotheistic creation, along with some notion of God's interaction with mankind through special figures like Abraham. Another common factor might be scriptures which overlap and have deep links, so that the New Testament, for example, affirms and continually quotes the Tanakh, claiming that Jesus is the fulfilment of all that it points to, and the Qur'an claims to confirm the earlier scriptures of Moses and Jesus.

However, what Hardy calls the 'deepest suppositions of the Abrahamic traditions' are mainly elements of uplifting and ennobling religious experience, which are also aspired to by adherents of non-Abrahamic religions and humanists. For the idea of something uniquely Abrahamic to be credible, defining both what is shared among these three traditions and also what distinguishes them from other worldviews, it must go beyond lofty aspirations for humanity.

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<sup>47</sup> Kepnes puts it this way: 'Jews do not see Christians as the rightful heir to the promises of the Torah nor do they see the New Testament as holy scriptures or revelatory for them.' Steven Kepnes, 'Hagar and Esau: From Others to Sisters and Brothers', in *Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions*, ed. by Peter Ochs and William Stacy Johnson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-47 (p. 34).

<sup>48</sup> Bristow, pp. 99-105.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, 'The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology*, 22 (2006), p. 533.

Christian mission and Islamic Da'wa also raise important questions for this approach.<sup>50</sup> Would the structured, largely interfaith and institutional setting of SR be threatened by efforts to use scriptural dialogue to persuade those of other faiths to convert? Can 'reasoning' in the SR sense include the 'reasoning from the scriptures' approach used by Paul in the synagogues and multi-religious forums of his day (Acts 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8, 9; 24. 25), which aimed to persuade others and make disciples of Jesus Christ? Or can it include Muhammad's calling to debate with and warn unbelievers (e.g. Q 2:119), since, as Neuwirth remarks, 'debate is one of the essential elements of the Qur'ān'?<sup>51</sup> If not, why not? One might reject efforts at persuasion from an understandable desire to avoid the divisions and even violence that could result from the rejection of such efforts to persuade others (sometimes against the messenger and sometimes against those who refuse to heed the warning). But if the very 'DNA' of these faiths calls for mission or da'wa, how can deeper encounter avoid it? Does not love of the God of truth require it?

Two 'families' thus emerge from the mass of scriptural dialogue material and activity, distinguished by their objectives. The first pursues 'scriptural reasoning' in order to create and deepen interfaith (especially Abrahamic) relationships, which are often strained or non-existent due to conflict (e.g. conflict between Islam and the West or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The second family of scriptural dialogue practitioners, while not rejecting these objectives, adds the purpose of witness and persuasion.

## Scriptural Dialogue to Persuade

Honest involvement with our respective Abraham stories may lead to deeper communication and significant dialogue carried out for other purposes, among which is dialogue for persuasive 'witness' in mission. This purpose both includes and goes beyond the 'dialogue as critical generosity' or the 'dialogue of theological exchange' referred to in major Vatican statements on interfaith dialogue,<sup>52</sup> as well as going further than the SR movement deems wise or fruitful. It moves to what may be described as challenging worldview by means of honest and respectful persuasion, based on the conviction that one's own faith is valuable and even necessary for the well-

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<sup>50</sup> Also spelled Da'wah, this refers to Islamic missionary work, preaching or 'summons' to faith. For a careful comparison of the two see David A. Kerr, 'Islamic Da'wa and Christian Mission: Towards a Comparative Analysis', *International Review of Mission*, 89 (2000).

<sup>51</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, 'Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97-114 (p. 108).

<sup>52</sup> Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 21.

being of the dialogue partner. Many Christians, for example, are persuaded of 'the inescapable particular, historical and exclusive dimension of the biblical revelation' and convinced of the importance of faithful witness to this revelation as part of genuine dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

Pursuing dialogue for witness and apologetics need not have the defensive, aggressive tenor represented by some evangelical anti-Islamic discourse in post-9/11 literature.<sup>54</sup> Nor does respecting differences require adoption of pluralism, as many advocates of interfaith dialogue seem to insist.

As a Christian teacher I resonate both with the need for clearer understanding of other faiths' use of Abraham for more substantial dialogue and with the goal of peaceful interfaith encounter. I see no necessary conflict between these goals and those of witness and mission. It is possible, indeed essential, to combine sensitivity and awareness of different traditions not only with authentic Christian peace-making, but also witness and even apologetics. This conviction underlies many genuine efforts for deeper encounter. Christian-Muslim peace-making or conflict transformation efforts do not necessarily lead to giving up what Reisacher describes as 'sharing God's love in Christ who died for our sins, rose again, and will return'.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps some ground can be staked out through a theology of religions that emphasises the *neighbour* and *hospitality*.<sup>56</sup>

My experience in Turkey shows that many Muslims respect openness about sincerely held faith commitments, while strongly opposing efforts to hide mission behind a cloak of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue in mission should avoid reductionist or patronising approaches to other faiths which give simplistic affirmation of their equal validity as ways to God and salvation, and the freedom of apologetics and witness must be part of healthy interfaith encounter.<sup>57</sup>

Dialogue based on texts which interpret the significance of Abraham so differently may well include some form of *apologetics*. This is a more controversial purpose of dialogue, entailing both the articulate defence of a position and the related goal of proving the opposing position to be wrong.

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, 'The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence', *Themelios*, 9 (1984), 14-15. For a recent biblical examination of perspectives on the purpose of other religions in God's providence see Daniel Strange, *'For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock': An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> See Richard Cimino, 'No God in Common:' American Evangelical Discourse on Islam after 9/11', *Review of Religious Research*, 47 (2005).

<sup>55</sup> Evelynne Reisacher, 'Evangelical-Muslim Peacemaking: Drink Lots of Cups of Tea', *Theology, News & Notes*, 56 (Spring 2009), p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Barnes, pp. 237-39.

<sup>57</sup> John Azumah, 'The Integrity of Interfaith Dialogue', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 13 (2002), 274.

Yet, interpreting the Bible honestly requires recognition of its polemical character in the face of the religions with which its human authors were in contact. As Wright states, 'The Bible makes remarkably universal claims in the midst of this religious plurality in relation to the revealing and saving effect of particular events.'<sup>58</sup> Certainly the New Testament enjoins witness and world-wide proclamation of the Gospel as an essential aspect of its message. Similarly, the Qur'an's polemical, debating approach is one of its most well-known characteristics.<sup>59</sup> Citing Q 6:125, the London Central Mosque issued a fatwa encouraging Muslim participation in Abrahamic scriptural dialogue with this reminder: 'According to the teaching of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad – Peace be upon him and all Prophets – Muslims are commanded to call to the way of Allah with wisdom and good admonition.'<sup>60</sup>

There is New Testament precedence for 'reasoning with' (διαλέγομαι) people from different religious backgrounds to convince them of the truth concerning Christ (e.g. Acts 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8-9). Stackhouse spells out what this persuasive reasoning might look like under the title of *humble apologetics*, arguing that 'the majority of Christians ever since have followed this pattern of constructive engagement with the ideas and minds of their day, in order that 'by all means I may save some' (I Corinthians 9.22).'<sup>61</sup>

Three significant goals can be identified for sincere and open dialogue conducted for mission and apologetics: (1) Substantial and respectful mutual understanding; (2) Mutual sharpening of understanding of each party's own texts and convictions; (3) Persuasion of dialogue partners to positions different from previously held, including conversion. The Abrahamic narrative is a good point for this process to begin, especially if the arena is credibly to be called Abrahamic Dialogue.

## Abrahamic Dialogue and Contextual Missiology

Can Abrahamic interfaith dialogue serve contextual missiology? It is in fact at the heart of it. Taking people seriously as made in the image of God and engaging them humbly and honestly as our neighbours goes hand-in-hand with the learning process basic to interfaith witness. The further we advance into conversation that is authentically 'Abrahamic' in more than name, the

<sup>58</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Interpreting the Bible among the World Religions', *Themelios*, 25 (2000), p. 47.

<sup>59</sup> See Neuwirth, p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> <[http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa\\_english.pdf](http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa_english.pdf)> [accessed 08 March 2018]

<sup>61</sup> John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 127.

more we are forced to grapple with the Abrahamic texts of the Bible and the Qur'an.

Yet much interfaith dialogue is not particularly 'Abrahamic' except in name. My most profound discomfort has been with some Christian contributors, who seem so ready to abandon Jesus as the messianic son of Abraham to embrace an ethical monotheism in the interest of ecumenism. As a Christian I am persuaded that the sacred text points to one overarching narrative moving from the particularity of God's call of Abraham to his universal blessing of all peoples through the one particular man, Jesus the true son of Abraham, ultimate heir and fulfiller of the patriarchal promise. Thus dialogue should not be limited to the pursuit of peace, justice, and reciprocal enrichment, although these are valid goals for dialogue. But if the goals of Abrahamic interaction are understood by both partners as mutual understanding, better communication, and even effective persuasion, it is also essential to articulate clearly the Christian perspective.

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## **‘A Tiny Theophany’: What Can 21<sup>st</sup> Century Baptists Learn from a 4<sup>th</sup> Century Poet-Theologian about Prayer?**

Rosa Hunt

### **‘A Tiny Theophany’ and an Unusual Tool for Ministry**

I write this article as a Baptist minister in Wales, and it seems to me that a change may be afoot in our Baptist practice in the United Kingdom. For so long our Baptist churches and chapels have been austere, intellectual buildings whose services are very much based around the Word and associated words. What with the pew Bibles, the hymn books to sing from, and maybe the overhead flat TV screens projecting lyrics and displaying Bible verses, you need to be pretty literate to survive a Baptist service in most UK churches. The centrality of the pulpit reminds us that the Word of God is central to our worship.

But sometimes we forget that the Word of God was a person, Jesus Christ, and that He represents the supreme revelation of God’s being. Of course, our main route to encountering Jesus is through the revelation of God’s word in the Bible, as our UK Baptist Declaration of Principle reminds us: ‘Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.’<sup>1</sup> But both the Bible itself and ancient church authorities are insistent that beside His self-revelation in Christ and in the words of the Bible, God has also chosen to reveal Himself in another major way too. That third way is through Nature<sup>2</sup>. The psalmist writes:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

<sup>2</sup> Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.

<sup>4</sup> Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <[https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration\\_of\\_Principle.aspx](https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx)> [accessed 30 November 2017]

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to capitalise ‘Nature’ throughout in order to keep it in parallel with my use of ‘Scripture’.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 19.1-4 (NIVUK).

And Paul, in writing to the Romans, reminds them that 'what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen'<sup>4</sup>. And yet it seems to me that the process of discerning God's self-revelation in Nature is not one which many Baptists have taken seriously. We are wary of bells and smells, anything which appeals to the senses rather than the mind.

However, the times may be a-changing. The monthly resource which my church purchases to help me plan our weekly service now contains suggestions for those who find that symbols help their worship. The same resource encourages me to prepare the worship space by 'bringing the outside in', and by having natural objects for the congregation to contemplate. Our weekly Bible Study group has been much taken by the writings of the Quaker Richard Foster, who encourages the regular and sustained meditation on a natural object as a spiritual discipline. 'We learn about the goodness of God not by contemplating the goodness of God', he writes, 'but by watching a butterfly.'<sup>5</sup> The Anglican theologian C. S. Lewis talks of 'the tiny theophany' which happens when we are caught up in amazement as we contemplate something beautiful, and we catch 'the smell of Deity'<sup>6</sup>. And perhaps most surprisingly, a recent book on prayer suggested an unusual tool for daily prayer: purchasing a magnifying glass for regular use in what the author calls the 'discipline of seeing' or the 'recovery of vision' of the natural world.<sup>7</sup> There seems to be a growing hunger for an experience of God which goes beyond the purely intellectual.

In this paper I want to suggest that looking to Nature to experience the presence of God is not suspicious, heretical, or a practice rooted in some flimsy, superficial teaching. Instead it turns out to be an entirely orthodox, centuries-old practice firmly rooted in a type of theology known as symbolic or sacramental theology. I will be looking in particular at the symbolic theology of a fourth century theologian known as Ephrem the Syrian to see what insights about prayer we can glean from his work.

## The Symbolic Theology of Saint Ephrem

### a) Who was Ephrem the Syrian?

Ephrem was born around 309, at or near Nisibis, a city of great strategic importance situated close to the ever-shifting lines of power drawn up

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 1.19-20 (NIVUK).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008), p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), pp. 89–90.

<sup>7</sup> Esther de Waal, *Lost in Wonder: rediscovering the spiritual art of attentiveness* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), p. 7.

between the great empires of Rome and Persia. This section describes the context within which he was living, worshipping, thinking, and teaching.

Accounts of the Christian church in Nisibis are generally accompanied by wails of despair at the paucity of the evidence, but nonetheless a few reasonable conjectures can be made.<sup>8</sup> In 313, when Ephrem was just a child, Constantine I and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan allowing religious freedom in general, and to the Christians in particular. It seems likely that this change encouraged the establishment of a bishopric at Nisibis, for we know that Jacob, traditionally known as the first bishop of Nisibis, attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 as a member of the anti-Arian lobby.<sup>9</sup> Ephrem would have been baptised as a Christian, but probably at too early a date for him to have enjoyed the splendid surroundings of the still extant baptistry.

Tradition tells us that Ephrem was the head or interpreter (*mpaššqana*) of the famous Christian school at Nisibis, though even the existence of the school at this point has been debated.<sup>10</sup> What is certain is that Ephrem produced several commentaries, which are both didactical and polemical in style, and could easily have been used as textbooks are used today. Ephrem was not a monk but he did live the life of one of the ‘Sons and Daughters of the Covenant’, a group of celibate Christians who lived a communal life but did not separate themselves off from the wider Christian community.<sup>11</sup> In 363 Nisibis was ceded to Persia by the Romans for 120 years, and it seems to be around the time of this decree that Ephrem left for Edessa.<sup>12</sup>

Like Nisibis, Edessa was located on major trade routes and was a city of great strategic importance.<sup>13</sup> It is also a city of great literary importance: it housed a famous archive, and the local Aramaic of the Edessa region became the literary language we now call ‘Syriac’. After the end of Seleucid rule in Edessa, this language became the administrative language, the royal language of the Abgarid dynasty and above all a religious language.<sup>14</sup> When

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Paul Russell, ‘Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian’, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, 8 (2005), 179–235, which contains a very helpful overview of the current state of information known to scholars about fourth century Nisibis.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen McVey (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian – Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord and Letter to Publius*, translated by Edward J. Mathews Jr. and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), pp. 15–27.

<sup>10</sup> The seventh century Barhadbsabba dates the school to the time of Bishop Jacob, but the scholarly consensus is that it is unlikely to go back earlier than the fifth century. See for instance McVey, *Commentary*, p. 29 and Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Louvain: In Aedibus Peeters, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Brock, S., *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 25–33.

<sup>12</sup> McVey, *Commentary*, pp. 31–33.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance J.F. Healey, ‘The Edessan milieu and the birth of Syriac’, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, 10.2 (2007), 115–127.

<sup>14</sup> For an account of the origins of Syriac in Edessa and its subsequent development see Healey, ‘Edessan milieu’.



Ephrem arrived there in 363 he would have found a church which, according to Eusebius, traced its origins back to Jesus himself who was said to have written a letter to the king of the city and to have sent Addai to found the Edessan church.<sup>15</sup>

We also learn that when Ephrem arrived in Edessa in around 363, Edessa had a Nicene bishop (Barses) by imperial order. However, it must not be assumed that the presence of Barses implied a strong, monolithic Edessan church which was unanimously Nicaean. Almost immediately after Ephrem's arrival Barses was exiled by Emperor Valens who supported the Arian Edessan Christians.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Ephrem seems to imply that when he arrived in Edessa he was shocked to discover that the Nicene Christians were marginalised to the extent that the title 'Christian' had gone to the 'heretics' (Marcionites) and the Nicenes had to content themselves with being named after a second century bishop. In the spring of 373, Ephrem mediated and supervised the distribution of grain during the famine in Edessa, but the effort seems to have proved too much for him, and on 9 June 373 he died.<sup>17</sup>

### b) Some Key Features of Ephrem's Symbolic Theology

Ephrem has always been known as a prolific writer, and also for the beauty and divine inspiration of his work:

When the holy Mar Ephrem was a child he had a dream or vision which he related to people and which he also wrote about in his testament: A vine sprouted on his tongue and grew up, and everything under heaven was filled by it. It bore abundant clusters, and even the birds of the sky came and ate of its fruit. The more they ate, the more its clusters increased.<sup>18</sup>

Ephrem himself probably wrote only in Syriac, but very early on his texts were translated into many languages. He wrote in both poetry and prose. His poetic works are divided into *madrašē* (hymns which were written in stanza form on a fixed syllabic pattern) and *mēmre* (metrical homilies which were written in couplets of 7+7 syllables).

Although Ephrem did write extensively in prose, it is his poetry which is the natural expression of his theology. Ephrem's understanding of the fundamental otherness of God and his reaction against Arianism led him to reject propositional or systematic theology as an arrogant enterprise doomed to failure. Instead he conducted his theology as a symphony of images,

<sup>15</sup> See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.13 which records a legend that the church in Edessa had an apostolic foundation and that the archives of Edessa contain a letter to the king of the city from Jesus himself.

<sup>16</sup> Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> McVey, *Commentary*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>18</sup> From Amar's rescension of the Syriac *Life of Ephrem*: see McVey, *Commentary*, p. 38.

metaphors, paradoxes, and tensions. The poetic genre is ideally suited to this type of language and indeed Ephrem is far more famous for his Hymns than for his prose works:

It is precisely because Ephrem's theology is not tied to a particular cultural or philosophical background, but rather operates by means of imagery and symbolism which are basic to all human experience, that his theological vision, as expressed in his hymns, has a freshness and immediacy today that few other theological works from the early Christian period can hope to achieve.<sup>19</sup>

In deductive prose, the author proceeds by attempting to limit the meaning, probably a fruitless task. How can God be defined and restricted in human language? The idea is blasphemous to Ephrem. In poetry, however, the poet multiplies image and metaphor, and the limit on meaning comes from the reader each time the poem is read and the journey is undertaken.<sup>20</sup> In poetry, the poet gifts us with an image which evokes some aspects of God's nature while repressing others. In the next image we see another facet of His nature, but the first aspect is now absent. And so it carries on. Therefore, a key reason for Ephrem's use of the verse form was that in the polyvalency of its imagery it reflected his understanding of the complex way in which God chose both to reveal and to hide Himself within the confines of human language.

In poetry, different images and metaphors are allowed to multiply, and indeed they breed in the reader's mind. This is what Harvey calls metaphor's 'power of suggestion' in which the metaphor does not limit the content of its sense. Instead, as both Harvey and Young point out, the metaphor

functions as a verbal icon: the revelatory efficacy and power of a religious metaphor depend upon its essential participation in the truth to which it points. The image is fundamentally related to its prototype, which is both its source and beyond the capacity of the image to contain. Thus a religious metaphor is meaningful to the extent that it is grounded in its divine prototype, but by its nature it cannot reduce the divine to a simple definition or identity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> See also Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) e.g. p. 145. Janet Soskice in *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) offers a detailed analysis of types of metaphor and a fascinating discussion of reference in theological realism.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, 'Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 37 (1993), 111-139 (p. 114). For Young see e.g. *Biblical Exegesis*, pp. 147-8.

### c) The Function of Symbols in Ephrem's Theology

Symbols were, for Ephrem, one of the three main modes of divine self-revelation.<sup>22</sup> God reveals Himself through symbols in Nature.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when we encounter, say, a rose, through our senses, the rose functions as a symbol by testifying to God's presence, and to some aspect of His divine nature. In other words, the rose is a *witness* (*šed, to witness*) to God:

In his book Moses described  
the creation of the natural world,  
so that both Nature and Scripture  
might bear witness to the Creator:  
Nature through man's use of it,  
Scripture, through his reading it;  
they are the witnesses [...] <sup>24</sup>

This understanding of a symbol as one which points to what it signifies is one that we can readily accept today. But Ephrem's understanding of a symbol goes far deeper than this initial surface meaning of witness. God has actually hidden something of His own objective reality within creation. God, who is Hiddenness (*kasyutha*), hides something of Himself within Nature. This is how we can ever get a glimpse of what God is like, because the Hidden One has chosen to reveal Himself by hiding something of Himself in creation for us to discover. Thus, Ephrem's understanding of the symbol is a far deeper one than we might assume today. The symbol, the created element of Nature under consideration, actually participates in some way in the life of the divine reality it symbolises.

The symbol, then, contains a certain life or power within itself by virtue of the One who has hidden some aspect of His divine life within it. This hidden life, or meaning, is what Ephrem referred to as the *hayla kasya* (hidden power). For those who have ears to hear, this language is highly reminiscent of the Eucharist, in which the ordinary bread and wine are understood by many Christians not only to witness to, but also somehow to confer, the life of the risen Christ. And indeed, while Ephrem uses several words to convey 'symbol', 'by far the most common term'<sup>25</sup> is *raza*, meaning secret, mystery or symbol. And it is the plural of this term (*raze*, mysteries) which is the standard Syriac word for the Eucharist.

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<sup>22</sup> The other two modes being the metaphors or 'names' which God permits Himself to be described by in Scripture, and, supremely, the Incarnation. See Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the spiritual world vision of St Ephrem the Syrian* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985), pp. 41 ff for the information in this paragraph.

<sup>23</sup> Or Scripture; however, in this paper I am going to concentrate on symbols in Nature.

<sup>24</sup> *HoP (Hymns on Paradise)* V:2.

<sup>25</sup> Brock, *Luminous Eye*, p. 41.

The hiddenness of God was a very important issue for Ephrem. One of his main apologetic concerns was to oppose the Arian view that Christ was to be included among the number of created beings, albeit the first of them all. The gap between Creator and creation was understood to be not only a physical one but also an ontological one: the Creator cannot be fully known in the same way that His creation can know and understand itself. Thus, if Christ was indeed created, it would be possible for the human mind to fully grasp and understand the Son. This would be blasphemy.

But hiddenness has an opposite: revealedness or *galyutha*. This is the objective reality of God which we, as created beings, cannot fully grasp in this life. According to our spiritual progress, and the clarity of our inner eye, we begin to grasp some aspects of God's revelation, but only in a hidden way. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, now we see through a glass, darkly, but then we shall see face to face.<sup>26</sup> The things which are revealed to us, the symbols in Nature and Scripture, never allow us full access to the revealedness of God. And Ephrem distinguishes between 'that which is revealed' (*galyatha*) and 'the divine revealedness' (*galyutha*).<sup>27</sup> It is clear that this tension which Ephrem perceives between the hiddenness and revealedness of God is a close parallel to the tension between His transcendence and His immanence.

## Symbolic Theology in Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*

### a) The Background to the *Hymns on Paradise*

In this section, I want to illustrate the main aspects of Ephrem's symbolic theology which I have outlined in the previous section by specifically referring to a collection of his poems known as the *Hymns on Paradise*.

The *Hymns on Paradise* fall into the category of *madraše*, as do most of Ephrem's poems. Ephrem's hymns have come down to us as a number of cycles: e.g. *On Faith*, *Against Heresies*, *On the Nativity* and *On Paradise*, which is the cycle studied in this article. It is a relatively small cycle (15 hymns) compare with e.g. *On Faith* which contains 87 hymns. The Paradise cycle has been preserved in three sixth century manuscripts, one of which incorrectly states that the cycle finishes at the end of Hymn XII.15. Ephrem uses a variety of syllabic patterns, but the one used in the Paradise cycle is 5+5. 5+5. 5+5. 7. 5+5. 5+5. Rhyme is only rarely used, and the original melody (*qala*) has been lost.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> I Corinthians 13.12.

<sup>27</sup> *HoP*, p. 43 (from the introduction by Sebastian Brock).

<sup>28</sup> Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, pp. 35–8.

## b) Hiddenness and Revealedness in the *Hymns on Paradise*

Ephrem's symbolic theology cannot be rightly understood without a grasp of the important role played by the tension between divine hiddenness and revealedness in his thinking.

From the outset, Ephrem alerts his readers to the depths of revelation available in the accounts of creation and fall:

the tale of the Garden -  
described by things visible,  
but glorious for what lies hidden.<sup>29</sup>

Ephrem also gives us, right at the outset of this poem, some hermeneutical advice. How should the reader rightly approach the mysteries of God, in order to benefit from what God has revealed without committing the heresy of attempting to investigate the hiddenness of God Himself?

With wisdom, however,  
I reconciled the two;  
I revered what lay hidden  
and meditated on what was revealed (*galyatha*).<sup>30</sup>

Indeed there are aspects of the divine reality which cannot be depicted even symbolically, for they are beyond human comprehension at any level. One such is the generation of the Son, which Ephrem considers an absolute mystery:

May my purpose not be judged by You, O knower of all things;  
may my search not be held blameworthy by You; concealed from all;  
for I have not made bold to speak of Your generation, hidden from all;  
in silence I have bounded the Word [...]  
From all who love You, be praise to Your hiddenness (*kasyutha*)!<sup>31</sup>

Something else which cannot be depicted even symbolically is the innermost part of Paradise, its summit wherein the Glory of God dwells:

not even its symbol can be depicted in man's thoughts;  
for what mind has the sensitivity  
to gaze upon it, or the faculties to explore it.<sup>32</sup>

In the first of these examples, Ephrem reminds us that God does not choose every aspect of His hiddenness to us, and that we should be careful

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<sup>29</sup> *HoP* I:1.

<sup>30</sup> *HoP* I:2. See above for the significance of *galyatha* rather than *galyutha*.

<sup>31</sup> *HoP* IV:11.

<sup>32</sup> *HoP* III:1.

not to overstep the mark in our theological enquiry by attempting to violate sacred ground. In the second, he reminds us that our own limitations as created beings serve to limit what can be revealed in and learnt from the symbols. Thus intellectual enquiry is not at all frowned upon – in fact, as long as it stays within appropriate bounds, it is positively encouraged:

With that manifest<sup>33</sup> knowledge which God gave to Adam,  
whereby He gave names to Eve and to the animals,  
God did not reveal the discoveries of things that were concealed<sup>34</sup>  
but in the case of that hidden knowledge  
from the stars downward, Adam was able to pursue  
enquiry into all that is within this universe.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, as each of us have different spiritual and mental endowments, we each receive different revelations about God when we meditate on the symbols:

upon each *according to his capacity* He bestows a glimpse  
of the beauty of His hiddenness, of the splendour of His majesty [...]  
accordingly as each here on earth prepares a receptacle for Him,  
so is he enabled to carry a small portion of his riches [...]  
The Lord who is beyond measure measures out nourishment to all,  
adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself, to our hearing His voice,  
His blessing to our appetite, His wisdom to our tongue.<sup>36</sup>

Here we have a clear parallel to the concept of *sunkatabasis*, or divine accommodation which Ephrem's near contemporary John Chrysostom made into a mainstream theological doctrine.<sup>37</sup> God freely chooses to limit Himself in words, names, and symbols in order to communicate with His creatures, adapting His self-revelation to their capacity to receive it, both collectively and also individually. We humans have no other means than human language at our disposal in order to meditate on and analyse the self-revelation of God, and God is gracious enough to use human language to communicate with us:

For him who would tell of it there is no other means

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<sup>33</sup> *galyatha* again.

<sup>34</sup> Ephrem uses *kasyatha* rather than *kasyutha* here, implying that he is speaking about those aspects of God's self which have been hidden inside the symbols as part of God's self-revelation, rather than those which are intrinsically hidden. These constitute the legitimate field of human (Adam's) enquiry, 'from the stars downward'.

<sup>35</sup> *HoP* XII:16.

<sup>36</sup> *HoP* IX:25-27.

<sup>37</sup> For a recent overview on the literature on Chrysostom and *συγκατάβασις*, David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy. The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching* (Oxford: OUP, 2014) is a good place to start. Another classic (earlier) source is Robert C. Hill, 'On Looking Again at Sunkatabasis', *Prudentia* 13 (1981).

but to use the names of things that are visible,  
thus depicting for his hearers a likeness of things that are hidden.  
[...] Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names,  
for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are akin to you;  
it is not because it is impoverished that it has put on your imagery;  
rather your nature is far too weak to be able  
to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished  
by being depicted in the pale colours with which you are familiar.<sup>38</sup>

Again we see the parallelism between the revealed, created world and the hidden heavenly reality – both Paradise and Nature use the same names and terms in order to help our comprehension, but the latter is but a weak imitation of the former.

### c) Symbols in the *Hymns on Paradise*

What is the purpose of our meditation on the symbols? Here is Ephrem's answer:

The mourner can find comfort therein, the child be educated thereby,  
the chaste become radiant through it, the needy find provision from it.<sup>39</sup>

Comfort, education, sanctification, provision – the life of God is bestowed through meditation on the symbols hidden and revealed in Nature and Scripture.

### *Participating in the Life of God by Meditating on the Symbols in Nature*

For Ephrem, a careful meditation on the symbols in Nature allows us to participate in God's great plan of salvation. This plan is what Andrew Louth refers to as the 'greater arch', from creation to deification. This is, always has been, and remains the supreme plan, the divine economy. Our vision is clouded, and the comforts we cling to are not always the ones which give us life. But in His goodness God has hidden Himself even within those moments which seem to us most hopeless of all. So, on meditating on birth, Ephrem finds the hope which God has hidden in death:

I was amazed at how even infants weep as they leave the womb -  
weeping because they come out from darkness into light  
and from suffocation they issue forth into this world!  
Likewise death, too, is for the world

<sup>38</sup> HoP XI:5,7.

<sup>39</sup> HoP IV:10.

a symbol of birth, and yet people weep because they are born  
out of this world, the mother of suffering,  
into the Garden of splendours.<sup>40</sup>

Ephrem can even find a witness to the story of God's saving love when he considers leprosy. Just as Moses commanded that a leprous man is driven from the encampment until 'the priest purifies him with hyssop, blood and water'<sup>41</sup>, so Adam 'became leprous and repulsive because the serpent had breathed on him'. Jesus the great High Priest beheld Adam, had compassion on him in his exile,

stooped down and came to him,  
He cleansed him with hyssop,  
and led him back to Paradise.<sup>42</sup>

Even leprosy, then, that most feared and dreaded of diseases, is not empty of the life-giving hope of God. It contains in itself a reminder and a promise of the God who can bring health out of sickness.

### ***The Joint Hermeneutical Enterprise of Eye and Mind***

Ephrem, like all of us, uses his eyes to 'read' the 'books' of Nature and Scripture where God has revealed Himself by hiding aspects of His nature in symbols. These symbols require interpretation, and Ephrem has some interesting things to say about his hermeneutical method.

Firstly, he is quite clear that our everyday knowledge of the natural world can help us understand theological mysteries. Every preacher, starting with those who liken the Trinity to a three-leaved clover (or, more recently, to a fidget spinner!) instinctively knows this. God seems to have structured and patterned the natural world so that the knowledge that we accumulate through our sense experience can help us understand the higher mysteries:

I considered the Word of the Creator and likened it  
to the rock that marched with the people of Israel in the wilderness;  
it was not from the reservoir of water contained within it  
that it poured forth for them glorious streams:  
there was no water in the rock, yet oceans sprang forth from it;  
just so did the Word fashion created things out of nothing.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *HoP* V:14.

<sup>41</sup> *HoP* IV:3.

<sup>42</sup> *HoP* IV:4.

<sup>43</sup> *HoP* V:1.



Again, Ephrem calls the reader's attention to the properties of the salt which they sprinkle on their food:

The Salt that seasoned itself to prevent losing its savour  
had been scattered all over the world by the hand of the Creator.<sup>44</sup>

What about the natural, unfailing rhythm of day and night? What comfort has God hidden in this for us?

In the evening the world sleeps, closing its eyes,  
while in the morning it arises. He who repays is distant  
as it were but a night's length away [...]  
Weary not, my brethren, nor suppose  
that your struggle will last long or that your resurrection is far off.<sup>45</sup>

In all these examples we see how Ephrem's knowledge of the natural world both helps him to grasp the provision of God's grace through His Son, but also to go deeper. The eye observes the outward form, but the mind which loves God discerns the *hayla kasya*, the hidden power inherent in the symbol.

We see then that, for Ephrem, interpreting symbols is a work which both eye and mind must undertake together: the eye does the 'reading', whether of Word or Nature, and the mind does the meditation:

The eye and the mind travelled over the lines  
as over a bridge, and entered together the story of Paradise.  
The eye as it read transported the mind;  
in return the mind, too, gave the eye rest  
from its reading, for when the book had been read  
the eye had rest, but the mind was engaged.<sup>46</sup>

Ephrem describes how at some point in the meditation, his eye had to remain outside, while his mind continued to wander within 'amid things not described'.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps we would describe this as the moment when having beheld the majesty of God's presence in Nature, our mind turns to wonder and praise. In his meditation, Ephrem's mind starts to question how it would be possible for all the righteous to live in the limited confines of Paradise. He then proceeds to answer this question by drawing on his two sources of revelation: Scripture and Nature. 'I asked about what is not written in Scripture, but my instruction came from what is written there',<sup>48</sup> he comments, as he turns to the story of the demon-possessed man with his

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<sup>44</sup> *Hop* VI:21.

<sup>45</sup> *HoP* VII:2.

<sup>46</sup> *HoP* V:4.

<sup>47</sup> *HoP* V:5.

<sup>48</sup> *HoP* V:7.

legion of demons. Then he invites us to reflect further on this problem by considering Nature:

Listen further and learn  
 how lamps with thousands of rays can exist in a single house,  
 how ten thousand scents can exist in a single blossom;  
 though they exist within a small space, they have ample room  
 to disport themselves.<sup>49</sup>

On another occasion, Ephrem is considering Jesus' mercy to the thief crucified with him<sup>50</sup> when suddenly he is seized with 'anguish' as he considers a 'dilemma': would the soul be able to see and hear once it reaches Paradise, if it is no longer contained within a body, its 'mate, [...], its instrument and lyre'? Again, Ephrem seeks for a parallel from Nature to help him understand, and this time he meditates on the symbol of the embryo:

Though the soul exists of itself and for itself,  
 yet without a companion it lacks true existence;  
 it fully resembles an embryo still in the womb,  
 whose existence is as yet bereft of word or thought.<sup>51</sup>

Reflecting on the helplessness of the embryo when isolated from its mother's womb helps Ephrem conclude that, at the restoration of all things, the body and soul will be united in a glorious resurrection. Like a human playing a lyre, the soul cannot function without a body to express its praise, and the body is silent unless 'at last the Creator breathed into it the soul which sang therein'.<sup>52</sup>

Sometimes Ephrem's understanding of the world of Nature differs from our own, which is not surprising given that seventeen centuries separate us from him. For instance, he believes that life is nourished and fed by the breeze. He berates the Chaldeans

[...] for they exalted the stars,  
 saying that it is they alone which give to the world all its nourishment.  
 But it is the air which gives suck  
 to the stars as well as to seedlings, to reptiles and to man.<sup>53</sup>

Just as fire is nourished by air, and the soul clearly dies when it is deprived of air, so Ephrem thought that air nourished and sustained every living thing. He then draws a parallel between this and the life-giving Spirit of God, the

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<sup>49</sup> *HoP* V:9.

<sup>50</sup> Luke 23.39-43.

<sup>51</sup> *HoP* VII:6.

<sup>52</sup> *HoP* VIII:8.

<sup>53</sup> *HoP* IX:15.

*ruha*, which is a female noun in Syriac. Ephrem draws a striking parallel between a mother feeding her baby and the Spirit of God who feeds and sustains all:

[...] the grains receive their birth, thanks to the wind;  
 at the good will of the Most High, who can perform all things,  
 does the breeze suckle them, like a mother's breast it nurtures them,  
 so that herein may be depicted a type of how spiritual beings are nourished [...]  
 Who has ever beheld a mother give suck  
 with her whole being to everything? Upon her hangs the whole universe,  
 while she depends on the One who is that Power which nourishes all [...]  
 how greatly will the soul be sustained on the waves of this joy  
 as its faculties suck at the breast of all wisdom.<sup>54</sup>

Once again we see Ephrem suggesting that God has structured the visible, tangible universe in such a way that it teaches us divine, heavenly realities.

The mind and eye also work together to extrapolate what can be seen to what can be imagined. Thus knowing the beauty of precious stones allows Ephrem to exclaim that 'these would appear ugly and dull' compared with the beauties of Paradise.<sup>55</sup> In a beautiful stanza Ephrem imagines that

In Paradise the cripples, who had never walked, leap around;  
 the deformed, who had never even crawled, fly about through the air;  
 the eyes of the blind and deaf, who had yearned from the womb,  
 hungering for the light which they had failed to see,  
 now rejoice to behold the beauty of Paradise,  
 and the mighty sound of its harps gives comfort to their ears.<sup>56</sup>

I am writing this article on a cold, wet, grey November day in Wales, and so I am comforted by the thought that in Paradise

[...] dismal February resembles radiant May,  
 January with its icy blasts is like August with its fruits.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *HoP* IX:12,14,23.

<sup>55</sup> *HoP* VII:4.

<sup>56</sup> *HoP* VII:13.

<sup>57</sup> *HoP* X:2.

## **Conclusion: Re-appropriating Symbolic Theology for Baptists**

In this article I have highlighted some key elements of Ephrem's theology which I now suggest that it would be helpful for us (twenty-first-century European Baptists) to consider re-appropriating.

The first of these is the tension between the hiddenness and the revealedness of God. Where Baptist theology has been heavily influenced by fundamentalist tendencies, we often see very definite claims made about God, God's thoughts, and God's preferences. Where, on the other hand, more 'liberal' influences are found, the church tends to shrink from definite statements which might seem exclusive or condemnatory. Ephrem cautions us to adopt a proper respect when thinking about and speaking about, and especially on behalf of, God.

The second is Ephrem's belief that God has patterned the created world in such a way that meditation on it can give the believer genuine insight into some aspects of divine reality. This is particularly important at a time when UK churches are seeing a disappearance of those traditionally seen as 'working class'. A YouGov survey conducted in 2014 found that 62% of people who regularly attend church identify as middle class, and another survey published in 2015 found that 81% of practising Christians in Britain today have a university degree, as compared with around 27% in the population in a whole.<sup>58</sup> Our church services are far too often structured in such a way that they exclude the less literate, and our baptism and discipleship courses are usually structured around reading preparatory books too. A reminder that we can learn about God in other ways than reading a book may not go amiss.

The third is the conviction that meditation on Nature is not just a way of learning about God. It can also serve as the vehicle for a genuine divine encounter. This is the sacramental aspect of Ephrem's theology, and the one likely to be most foreign to many Baptists. To use Ephrem's language, we start with our eyes, then where the eye leads the mind follows. If the grace is given to us, the mind leaves the eye behind, and encounters some aspect of the divine reality which results in involuntary adoration. To use C. S. Lewis' language, 'one's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun'.<sup>59</sup> It should come as no surprise that each and every one of Ephrem's poems ends in a prayer.

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<sup>58</sup> Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, *Church for the Poor: Transforming the Church to Reach the Poor in Britain Today* (Eastbourne: David C. Cooke, 2017), p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Letters*, pp. 89-90.

## Mission and Place: From Eden to Caesarea

Mike Pears

### Introduction

‘Place’ is ubiquitous. It seems a truism to say that place is all around us and that indeed all life is somehow an expression of being placed. Yet it is this very everydayness or taken-for-granted-ness of place that is one of its most potent characteristics. The familiar physicality of the natural and built environments present the world to us as ‘normal’, ‘common sense’, or even ‘God given’. Yet the same familiarity that enables us to navigate through complex social and spatial landscapes without a second thought also functions to hide from us whole worlds of meaning and power.<sup>1</sup> These worlds – which are effectively hidden in plain sight – may be glimpsed when the taken-for-granted, or normative, meanings of place are somehow transgressed. This may happen, for instance, in a moment of personal encounter which opens up a fissure or exposes a ‘wound’ in an otherwise normal everyday experience.<sup>2</sup> Let me offer a few examples of how such a fissure might bring to light an otherwise hidden world of meaning. Consider the familiar phrase ‘a woman’s place is in the home’. You would, I suspect, react with indignation on hearing such a phrase. Yet this expression was, until recently, commonplace and moreover taken as a self-evident truth in relation to the design of government provided housing of the 1930s to justify a small ‘pantry’ (kitchen) being placed at the rear of the house.<sup>3</sup> The cultural norm was expressed in bricks and mortar and, in turn, the buildings portrayed the ‘truth of the phrase’ as normative or ‘just the way things are’. Similarly, consider a group of women wearing hijabs walking down a street in the London borough of Newham; they would no doubt go unnoticed. Yet the same group of women hiking in the hills of the Lake District may well attract some attention. The sense of indignation or discomfort in each case is not related to the subjects in view, but is rather to do with where they are placed and how they either conform to or transgress the accepted conventions of the place.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Cresswell, *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Rosamond Jevons and John Madge, *Housing Estates: A Study of Bristol Corporation Policy and Practice Between the Wars*, ed. Prof. A.M. Tydnall (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1946).

Transgressions of this sort can act as indicators of the many layered and complex sets of meaning and constructions of power which inhabit everyday places. They suggest to us that even the apparently safe and familiar places of home and high street are not as benign as we might suppose, but are in fact sites where meaning and power are contested. Neither are the values or truths that seem inherent within a place as static and fixed as the solid features of the built and natural environments would have us believe. As in the example of the 1930s government housing, what appears to be a common-sense interpretation of the built environment to one generation can be an anathema to the next.

## From Eden to Caesarea

Whilst these associations between place, meaning, and power are clearly evidenced within biblical narrative, they remain largely unexplored in mainstream theology.<sup>4</sup> In writing this paper I hope to whet the appetite of at least a few readers with the thought that, by pursuing a deeper and more thought-through theology of place, we might gain significant, helpful insight in relation to the mission of the church in a world where many feel displaced, dislocated, and precarious.<sup>5</sup>

The particular theme I will focus on here is the apparent paradigm shift that takes place in the spatial imagination in moving from Old Testament to New Testament narrative, a shift which I am presenting here as a move from Eden to Caesarea. Such a shift should not be surprising to us, given the well-established understanding that the New Testament's interpretation of the Old involves a simultaneous pattern of both continuity and discontinuity.

I am, however, suggesting that, on balance, the spatial imaginations (and resultant practices) which currently dominate the church's mission tend strongly towards the Eden end of the spectrum. My hope is that, as we understand why the behaviour of Peter and Cornelius at their meeting in Caesarea was so utterly remarkable, we ourselves might also be awakened to a renewed spatial imagination. I will argue that it is this same spatial imagination, first embodied in the life of the church at Caesarea, which is

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of these discussions, see Eric Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus: An Alternative Spatial Practice in the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Clark, 2009); Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2003); T.J. Goringe, *A theology of the built environment: justice, empowerment, redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the sacred: place, memory, and identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Michigan U.S.A. and Cambridge U.K.: Eerdmans, 2008); Guy Standing, *The Precariat* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

central to the practical outworking of the Kingdom of God and new-creation as envisioned within New Testament texts.

## The Spatial Imagination of Eden

In *Where Mortals Dwell*, Craig Bartholomew not only takes Eden as a key starting point for his study of place, but argues that Genesis 1-3 is a foundational text for a biblical theology of place. Bartholomew presents a series of key proposals which form the basis of his biblical theology of place; amongst them are:

1. God intends for humans to be at home in, to indwell, their places. Place and implacement[sic] is a gift and provides the possibility for imaging God in his creation. Place is thus a dynamic concept evoking the creative engagement of humans with their contexts.
2. Place is never fully place without God as co-inhabitant. Place is thus always, in one way or another, a theological concept.
3. After Eden the challenge of implacement and the danger of displacement are a constant part of the human condition. Humans remain placed, but displacement is a constant threat.<sup>6</sup>

Bartholomew's reading of place as a space to be indwelled and co-inhabited with others and with God strikes a deeply evocative note, especially for those who suffer displacement or fear the loss of home. This theological reading of place finds resonance with the work of Walter Brueggemann in his theology of the Promised Land. In an oft-quoted paragraph Brueggemann asserts that

Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against all the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.<sup>7</sup>

The theologising of place on the basis of Eden and Land leads to two central observations. The first is about the relational nature of place defined by the key relationship of 'God-people-place'.<sup>8</sup> The second is the imperative of place-making:

The embodied nature of human beings means that our placedness [sic] is always local and particular; so too will be our primary responsibility for placemaking.

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<sup>6</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomew, *Mortals*, pp. 2-3, 14-16, 29-31; John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 46-47; Brueggemann, *Land*, pp. 1-14.

Just as the first couple is called to tend to Eden, so we are called to tend to the respective places in which we have been put.<sup>9</sup>

These two key ideas find strong resonance in Christian tradition, especially with ideas of sacred places and, more recently, with practices of place-making and 're-neighbouring' within mission. They are well argued elsewhere and I will not rehearse the arguments again here.<sup>10</sup>

However, serious criticism has been levelled at the spatial imaginations inherent within these Eden- and Land-based theologies. At the risk of oversimplifying the model (but wanting to aid the reader's own spatial imagination), the spatial constructions of Eden and Land could be represented as a bounded space set apart by walls or rivers which define an 'inside' (the territory of the people of God) and conversely an outside (the territory of those who are *not* the people of God). The identity of the people is based not only on their relationship to God and Land (Brueggemann) but also over-and-against those who are outside. The spatial imagination of Eden and the Land are thus sustained by religious practices of boundary enforcement which both include and exclude.<sup>11</sup>

These ideas were persuasively presented by Mary Douglas in her ground-breaking book *Purity and Danger*.<sup>12</sup> Douglas, who worked as an anthropologist in the field of comparative religion and religious beliefs within primitive cultures (including those of ancient Israel), observed that in tribal cultures dirt was not a matter of hygiene or aesthetics but that pollution and taboo are cultural constructs that relate to the imposition of order on society through categorisation and differentiation. Douglas coined the basic definition of 'dirt as matter out of place'<sup>13</sup> and argued that the definition of dirt implies two conditions:

(A) set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bartholomew, *Mortals*, p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> John Inge, for example, expresses the conviction that Christians should be at the forefront of the recovery of place, and that the focus of such recovery is to rediscover the 'dormant virtue of neighbourliness'. Inge, *Place*, p. 135. See also Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014); Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014); Bartholomew, *Mortals*, pp. 234-318.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 181-184.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Douglas, *Purity*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas, *Purity*, p. 44.



In a tribal context peoples were categorised and differentiated as pure or impure: those who were impure or polluted were tabooed; they were socially, spatially, and representatively expelled from the life of the tribe.

In the 1990s a group of biblical scholars called the ‘Context Group’ drew on the work of Douglas and other social scientists as a frame for reading scripture.<sup>15</sup> They argued that the purity laws, as held in the Second Temple period, dominated the spatial imagination in Israel and that for Israel spatial representation was organised around degrees of purity according to proximity to the Temple, which itself stood at the centre of all creation. One of the members of the Context Group, Bruce Malina, argues that ‘the orientational map of Israel consists of two major category sets: the sacred and profane (exclusive and nonexclusive) and the pure/clean and impure/unclean (in proper place/out of place)’.<sup>16</sup> Purity laws for Israel prescribed the way of being ‘set apart’ for a God who himself was known as holy, or separate; they defined the ways of moral behaviour required to belong to an exclusive people whose identity was rooted in covenant relationship to an exclusive God. As such, morality in Israel is defined by conformity to purity law – to be moral is to belong.

On this reading, the spatial imagination of Eden and Land are very far from the seemingly benign home-space portrayed by Bartholomew; they are potent geographies of exclusion where those who lack the privilege of birth and commensurate purity are expelled to the outer fringes of the world. Indeed, exclusion is a dominant theme of Eden and Land narratives – Genesis 3 presents us not with a populated garden but with one which is uninhabited by human presence.

At this point I should make a brief qualification. The spatial imagination of Israel was, of course, much more complex and less ‘fixed’ than has been suggested thus far.<sup>17</sup> Other cultural-religious mappings which are evident within biblical texts suggest that the spatial mapping varied within a community and changed through time. Examples of the ways in which meaning imbibed place in this way are in terms of whether a place was ‘civilised’ or not,<sup>18</sup> as hierarchical male spaces,<sup>19</sup> or as carrying a range of ideological<sup>20</sup> and cosmological<sup>21</sup> readings.

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<sup>15</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2008), p. xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Malina, *Insights*, p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion see M. Pears, ‘Towards a Theological Engagement with an Area of Multiple Deprivation’ (PhD dissertation, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Stewart, *Gathered*.

<sup>19</sup> Moxnes, *Putting*.

<sup>20</sup> Norman Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> John K. Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

Despite this complexity, however, the key point to notice is that each of these mappings serves to establish identities: they make claims about who ‘we’ are in relation to gods/God and territory (and in this sense they are ideological) over and against who ‘they’ are. They not only include but they also exclude. Thus, when Jesus declared that all foods were clean, he was not simply making an argument about religious practice. He was deconstructing and undoing the spatial imagination of Israel; he was in effect claiming that the world was being changed and that the whole social-spatial infrastructure upon which all power was predicated was being displaced to make room for a new arrangement. More of this later. First, to be properly prepared for a discussion about the shift of spatial imagination from Eden to Caesarea, we should be aware of some of the significant work that has been carried out within the social sciences. Whilst we can touch only briefly on the subject here, I hope that it is apparent that this is one of the instances where cross-disciplinary conversation is much needed.

### **A Brief Excursion into Social Scientific Theories of Place**

It is sobering to see how far theological studies of place have fallen behind the social sciences and it is essential that theology is conversant with the social sciences in this respect.<sup>22</sup> I will reference the work of just two social scientists here, which I hope will communicate the sense of the correlation that exists between some aspects of theology and social sciences.

The first is David Sibley who, in his book *Geographies of Exclusion*, argues that the primary social arrangements of place are based on exclusion such that ‘others’ (such as women, blacks, children, the old, those with alternative lifestyles, gays, the disabled) are placed as outsiders.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in speaking of the home, he sees it not as a place of secure ‘dwelling’ but rather as an embodiment of inequitable power:

Inside the home and the immediate locality, social and spatial order may be obvious and enduring characteristics of the environment. For those who do not fit, either children whose conceptions of space and time are at variance with those of controlling adults or the homeless, nomadic, or black in a homogeneously white, middle class space, such environments may be inherently exclusionary.<sup>24</sup>

A key point we need to notice from Sibley’s argument is that there is no hard and fast separation between the traditional religious ideas of sacred

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<sup>22</sup> A helpful introduction to the study of place is Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> The term ‘outsiders’ is not intended to evoke a simple insider/outsider paradigm. Sibley argues for a much more complex and nuanced social arrangement of place and, indeed, the ethnographic research in Chapter 5 of this thesis shows that marginalised ‘estate dwellers’ who exclude ‘outsiders’ are also people of power.

<sup>24</sup> David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 99.

space and modern secular spaces; exclusion is the dominant formative power in *all* places. So the perception of the ‘sanctity of space’ and the ‘continuing need for ritual practices’ to maintain that sanctity applies not only to religious spaces but to all other places, whether they be trendy cafes, shopping malls or railway stations. He asserts that:

[These] rituals, as in ancient Israel ... are an expression of power relations: they are concerned with domination. Today, however, the guardians of sacred spaces are more likely to be security guards, parents or judges than priests. They are policing the spaces of commerce, public institutions and the home rather than the temple.<sup>25</sup>

For Sibley, therefore, place is symbolically important in the construction of ‘deviancy’, where defining what is deviant depends on the process of stereotyping ‘others’ (‘othering’) in terms of dirt. Sibley argues that the broad categorisation of individuals or groups in terms of dirt can be presented in a number of key sub-categories; namely, disease (‘we might catch something from them’), nature (‘a swarm’), foreigners (‘go back to where they came from’). You only need to read a copy of any tabloid paper to see a generous scattering of such references applied to the unemployed, those who are homeless or having to depend on state benefits.

A second social scientist whose work has bearing on the themes we are exploring here is Tim Cresswell. The first point of Cresswell’s that I want to highlight is that he develops the thesis that ‘place’ combines the social with the spatial and that people act ‘in place’ according to their social standing. As an example of this he cites the case of an ordinary office where cleaners, secretaries and executives all act according to their relation to that particular place.<sup>26</sup> A key part of Cresswell’s thinking is that social space is organised to serve the interests of those at the top of hierarchies (it is thus ideological). Actions or activities which do not conform to the accepted meaning of the place are now seen as deviant or ‘out of place’—judgements are not made about actions per se, but about the action’s relation to its location or place (secretaries would not sit in the executives’ chairs).

The second point, which follows closely on the heels of the first, is to recognise that there is a two-way flow of constructive influence between the physical/material and the social aspects of place. This is to criticise the imagined binary that says that society shapes space (or place) but the converse – that space shapes society – is not the case. Cresswell vigorously

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<sup>25</sup> Sibley, *Geographies*, p 72. Interestingly Miroslav Volf expresses a not dissimilar view: ‘As a power of normalization, exclusion reigns through all those institutions that we may associate with inclusionary civilization—through the state apparatus, educational institutions, media, sciences. They all shape ‘normal’ citizens with ‘normal’ knowledge, values, and practices, and thereby either assimilate or eject the ‘ab-normal’ other. The modern self ... is indirectly constituted through the exclusion of the other’ (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), p. 62).

<sup>26</sup> Cresswell, *In Place*, p. 3.

rejects this position and drawing on other social scientists (including Robert Sack, David Harvey, and Edward Soja) argues that space and society are co-constructing:

[T]hey wish to show that space is not simply formed and moulded but plays an active role in the formation of society. Society produces space and space produces society.”<sup>27</sup>

These arguments make some important points about the spatial imagination of Eden and present significant challenges to any form of mission that is predicated on that set of ideas. Sadly, however, there is not room here to expand on these and other key insights from the social sciences in the way that they really deserve.<sup>28</sup> But even this very brief snapshot should helpfully prepare the ground for seeing why a shift to the spatial imagination of Caesarea might be so profound. It might help our discussion about Caesarea if, before moving on, I summarise what some of the points are:

1. That all geographies, including those of Eden and Land, are exclusionary: power is expressed in the monopolisation of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments.
2. That places are invested with meaning and those who do not conform to the dominant meanings of the place are seen as deviant or ‘out of place’.
3. That the nature of place causes these meanings to go generally unnoticed; they are regarded as ‘just the way things are’, ‘taken for granted’, or ‘God-given’.
4. That social-space is organised to serve the interest of those at the top of hierarchies (it is ideological).
5. That place is not fixed, bounded or static. Rather it is dynamic and open. Indeed, the material and social are co-constituting, each acting on the other in the production of place.

## **The New Spatial Imagination of Caesarea**

This brief discussion of place suggests some interesting interpretive approaches to familiar New Testament texts and consequent practices for

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<sup>27</sup> Cresswell, *In Place*, p. 12. For a discussion on binaries see Paul Cloke and Ron Johnston, *Spaces of Geographical Thought: Deconstructing Human Geography's Binaries* (London: SAGE, 2005), pp. 1-20.

<sup>28</sup> See Paul Cloke and Mike Pears (eds), *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016) and ---, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Praxis* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016).

mission. In this instance I will focus on Acts 10 and the events at Caesarea which culminate in the face-to-face meeting of Cornelius and Peter.

This is no ordinary meeting. The boundaries (cultural-religious-spatial) which separate these two men and their entourages are formidable. Indeed, for them, the very idea of meeting is inconceivable, taboo. Yet Luke's narrative has been inexorably moving his readers to this point. That the gospel would be a light to the Gentiles has been a major theme from the very beginning of the text (Luke 2.32; Isaiah 42.6)<sup>29</sup> and Acts 13 could be seen as the much-anticipated moment of fulfilment as, for the first time, Gentiles are actually being included in the early church (coinciding as it does with the completion of Peter's ministry and the beginning of Paul's).

Furthermore, Luke has already presented Jesus himself as provocatively disregarding the normal Jewish and Roman social-spatial arrangements. He has with impunity transgressed the norms of religious purity,<sup>30</sup> the hierarchical settlement of 'male-space',<sup>31</sup> and the Roman hegemonic space of empire.<sup>32</sup> These dramatic cultural-spatial performances suggest that to see Jesus simply as one who radically crosses boundaries falls far short of Luke's intent. Jesus acts as if the boundaries did not exist and his declaration of the kingdom seems to be no less than an inauguration of an entirely new spatial imagination accompanied by a host of social-spatial performances that witness to and embody an as yet unseen and unknown kind of place – indeed, nothing less than the new creation.

Given all that has been spelled out in Luke's narrative, the surprise of Acts 10 is that Peter is presented as being so disorientated or unseeing in the face of the momentous meeting that is about to take place.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this is itself a testimony to the sheer strength of the cultural-religious hegemony of the day that placed such a meeting so far beyond the realms of possibility. As Luke records, Peter 'was greatly perplexed' (v.17) and it was only through his eventual encounter with Cornelius that he could say, 'God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean' (v.28). Peter was not the only one amongst the Jews who was amazed (v.45) and he certainly had his work cut out convincing the wider church about what had taken place.

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<sup>29</sup> For the complementary phrases 'a light to the Gentiles' and 'the ends of the earth' see Isaiah 42.6; 49.6; Luke 2.32; Acts 13.46-47; 26.23; for 'when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' see Isaiah 32.15; Luke 24.49; and for 'you will be my witnesses' see Isaiah 43.10, 12; Luke 24.49. David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and Stock, 2000), p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> For discussion see: Malina, *Insights*; Jerome H. Neyrey, 'The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel', *Semeia* 35 (1986), 91-128.

<sup>31</sup> Moxnes, *Putting*.

<sup>32</sup> Stewart, *Gathered*.

<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright, *Victory* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 308-310.

The first movement of the story therefore relates to Peter's own spatial imagination – his own *inner* sense of how the world worked. This is a fundamental point of departure for those disciples who wish to follow Jesus into the spatial practices of the new creation: the movement away from the exclusionary spatiality of Eden and Land and towards the inclusive spatiality of the new creation starts within the self. There should be no surprise in this focus on self as, with the other Gospel writers, Luke presents Jesus as naming these exclusionary practices – and indeed all exclusion of others – as 'sin' (note, for example, the speck and the log of Matthew 7.1-5). He was, according to Miroslav Volf's profound exposition of the practices of exclusion and embrace, 'no prophet of 'inclusion' for whom the chief virtue was acceptance and the cardinal vice intolerance'.<sup>34</sup> Rather he challenged the belief that the source of evil lies outside of a person, in impure things, and identified it as being 'in the impure heart' (Mark 7.15). Thus:

The pursuit of false purity emerges as a central aspect of sin – the enforced purity of a person or a community that sets itself apart from the defiled world in a hypocritical sinlessness and excludes the boundary breaking other from its heart and its world. Sin is here the kind of purity that wants the world cleansed of the other rather than the heart cleansed of the evil that drives people out by calling those who are clean 'unclean' and refusing to help make clean those who are unclean. Put more formally, sin is 'the will to purify' turned away from the 'spiritual' life of the self to the cultural world of the other, transmuted from spirituality into 'politics' broadly conceived ...<sup>35</sup>

This seems a final indictment against the social-spatial practices of the purity codes associated with Eden and the Land. No wonder much of the narrative is caught up with Peter's dramatic inner experience – surely nothing less than a personal conversion. First through his dream (vv.9-16) and then by coming into the 'Gentile space' of Cornelius's house (vv.22-35) Peter turns away from centuries of Jewish tradition as he says, 'God has shown me that I should not call any person unholy or unclean' (v.28) and that 'God is not one to show partiality' (vv.28, 34).

We should not overlook the significance of who is doing the moving in this story, or of who is the guest and who is the host. It is notable that Peter is the one doing the travelling, it is he who moves out of his own world, beyond the social and geographical boundaries which previously fenced him in, and into the unfamiliar world of the Gentile community. Perhaps he is reflecting in his own physical journey the movement prophesied by Isaiah that the gospel would be a light to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42.6; 49.6; Luke 2.32; Acts 13.46-47; 26.23). This Spirit-initiated movement was not for him a calling of Gentiles into his space, his 'pure' God space, so that they could come to know his God as he knew him and participate in his faith

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<sup>34</sup> Volf, *Exclusion*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>35</sup> Volf, *Exclusion*, p. 74.

traditions. Rather, by moving into the cultural and faith space of the stranger, the story focuses on a graphic exposure of the limitations of Peter's own faith space and how his construction of his religious space made him blind to the humanity of others ('I too am a man' (human) and 'I should not call any person holy or unclean'(v.26)).

Perhaps one of the most sinister aspects of Peter's blindness to the humanity of the Gentile-other is the inability to conceive that God is in any way with them (as, for example, in the judgement of Matthew 25.38-40: 'When did we see you a stranger ... naked ... sick ... in prison?'). It is the prejudicial conviction that 'God is with me, but not with you' that is both a cause and consequence of hard cultural, religious and spatial boundaries such as those around Peter; boundaries which fuel the stereotyping of people such as Cornelius as 'godless pagan' (exemplified in the 'amazement' of 'all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter' – see Acts 10.45). In moving out of the security of his own cultural space with all its preconceived certainties and into the vulnerability of Cornelius's home it seems that, for the first time, Peter's eyes were being opened to the truth that the God he worshipped might also be found outside of the confines of his own religious tribe (Acts 10.34-35).

In his beautiful and persuasive book *The Go-Between God*, John Taylor describes 'the current of communication' between the self and the other as an essential work of the Holy Spirit. He insists that a necessary part of Christian mission is:

(T)he opening of our eyes towards other people. And this also is the gift of the Spirit. A Christian can never be the means of communicating Christ to another until what we might call the current of communication has been switched on. The scales fell from the eyes of the convert in the city of Damascus precisely when he heard one of these whose very lives he had been threatening say: 'Saul, my brother, the lord Jesus has sent *me to you*'. I-Thou.<sup>36</sup>

Taylor's words are as applicable to Peter as they are to Paul. Peter's journey and the hospitality of Cornelius has dramatically changed the tone of the story. The current of communication has been established. What began as a cultural and geographical distance between the two (a distance which was initially and tentatively bridged by messengers (Acts 10.8-9, 17-20)) has moved to an intimate place of face-to-face dialogue where, for the first time, strangers share personal experiences and stories. As they recognise shared humanity and faith in God, each of their lives are changed in ways which just days before had been inconceivable. As Taylor puts it:

This is the gift of the Go-Between God, the Spirit. Just as he opens my eyes in recognition of some other being and generates a current of communication

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<sup>36</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 21.

between us, in the same way he can open my awareness towards the reality of myself.<sup>37</sup>

## **Mission and the Spatial Imagination**

In one sense the actual embodiment of the spatial imagination of Caesarea is so limited as to seem at first sight of little consequence. It is after all only witnessed as a momentary relational space which exists between two men – it is limited in its timeframe as well as in geography. Yet, like the empty tomb on the day of resurrection, once the event has taken place (once the kingdom has come on earth as in heaven) there is no going back. This is the power of the ‘prophetic imagination’.<sup>38</sup> It is to bring into view that which is not yet seen, for in so doing the machinations of the powers are exposed and the Lordship of Christ is made known (Colossians 1.13-23).

What then, might we ask, are the practical implications for mission and what kinds of things might we hope to see which bear witness to the formation of new-creational spaces? There is certainly a need for more ‘reflexive space’ within the practices of mission (as with Peter’s experience) and a confession that mission must involve the ongoing conversion of the self as well as the other. One such reflexive moment occurred in the experience of our own small Christian community, when one of our number was invited on a caravan holiday by a group of men in their fifties. The men were all long-term residents of the predominantly white estate that we called home and being outside of regular employment were represented in the tick-box culture of the welfare system as ‘hard to reach’. As a group we (of course) considered ourselves more enlightened and eschewed this stereotypical labelling of people. The gut response, however, of our community member to the open-hearted invitation to share a caravan holiday was of strong rejection: “There was no way I wanted to spend a week in a caravan with that group!” ‘Hard to reach’ works both ways. From the standpoint of the group of men, we too were hard to reach and the encounter presented us with a disturbing glimpse of the extent to which we had bought into this misrepresentation of others. Our own spatial imaginations were, after all, not as free or enlightened as we had thought. The Peter-Cornelius narrative, however, might draw our attention to the redemptive potential in such an encounter, where the painful realisation of our own obliviousness might also constitute a new ‘shared space of appearance’ where relationships between those who are culturally and socially other might be newly imagined.<sup>39</sup> At a practical level this realisation enabled our community

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> For ideas of ‘the obliviousness that is associated with power’ and ‘shared spaces of appearance’ see McClintock Fulkerson, *Places*.



member to spot the gift in the invitation (that these men saw a friendship rather than a client-provider relationship) and on subsequent occasions to lean more strongly into the humanising opportunities for friendship.

Alongside this reflexive practice there is, I suggest, the need to focus on creative and innovative social, spiritual, and spatial practices whose intent is to participate with ‘the Spirit of the Go-Between God’ in opening up ‘new-creational spaces’ in our own mundane, everyday worlds. I say ‘mundane’ and ‘everyday’ to draw attention to our propensity when thinking of innovative practice to project imagination and energy to some exciting mission context or project and to wholly overlook our own familiar habitation. It is not unusual, for example, to sit in a meeting, as I recently did, when the same social-spatial boundaries we are talking about overcoming in our mission are forcefully alive within the room – yet, critically, unacknowledged and unnamed. Of the five of us sitting around the table, the single ethnic minority person present (who had actually convened the meeting) was, as a consequence of the social arrangement, almost silent. Our ability to participate in the opening of ‘new creational spaces’ will only ever be as effective as when we are able to see those spaces emerge within our own familiar habitations – otherwise we will simply remain in the mode of projecting our own social-spatial sense of the world on others around us.

And finally, there is a risky invitation to have the courage to leave behind our safe, self-constructed, Eden-like, places and – like Peter – respond to the knock at the door and journey out as a stranger into the social and cultural spaces of others. Such it seemed was a Spirit-given invitation for another member of our Christian community who, aware of the limitations to relationship of his professional helping role in an advice centre, invited a couple of younger men to his home to ‘watch the footie’ on TV. This quite quickly evolved into regular evenings of playing poker (for small change) where for up to four or five hours a group of men would drink beer, play cards, and have fun. In these times, sitting around a dining room table rather than across an advice centre counter, the space of person-to-person encounter was newly convened; social prejudice began to be eroded and men began to talk into the early hours of the morning about the things that mattered to them. Was this in any sense an embodiment of the spatial imagination of Caesarea? It is difficult to say. But when one of the men said that this was the only friendship he had that didn’t involve hitting someone, it seems that something of a conversion was beginning to happen for all involved. The challenge of these new-creational spaces is that they remain (by definition) outside of our control; sometimes all we can do is sit with the uncertainty of the question ‘is this a Caesarea-type space?’ But, given the argument I have presented here, cultivating the spirituality of the question, rather than the certainty of the answer, is precisely the kind of intuitive

practice that is at the heart of participation with the Spirit in the formation of new-creational spaces.

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## **Creating Convictional Community: Missional Spirituality in the Moravian Community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1741-1762**

Jon Hardin (graduated 2014)

**ABSTRACT (abridged):** This study suggests that the Moravian congregation at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania during the first two decades of its existence can be helpfully viewed in terms of James McClendon's notion of a convictional community; that is, a community which lives under a guiding vision which encompasses its self-identity, sense of purpose, and way of life. The guiding vision for Moravian Bethlehem, as conceived by its leaders, placed this Pietistic religious community at the very centre of an elaborate scheme to penetrate colonial North America and the Native American tribes beyond white settlement with the gospel message and the benefits of Christian fellowship. The constellation of outwardly reaching ministries which quickly developed and extended throughout the mid-Atlantic colonies was sustained by a lifeline of provision that originated in the congregation at Bethlehem. Aside from economic and logistical forms of support, the Bethlehem congregation sustained this broad mission through its own spiritual life. This study centres upon the connection between the early religious life of colonial-era Moravian Bethlehem and its existence as a missional centre in British North America. The primary research question which frames this study is this: How did the mid-eighteenth century Moravians of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania shape, articulate, and sustain their community's sense of missional identity and purpose? Religious life in Bethlehem was organised to nurture hour-by-hour fellowship between congregation members and Christ. Within an intricate system designed to nourish the soul, however, were ever-present reminders of the outward calling of the church. This study demonstrates that Bethlehem's missional identity, communal fellowship, and outward ministry were consciously emphasised and sustained by means of varied and deeply meaningful spiritual practices. Through daily participation in the community's religious rituals, congregation members came to share certain convictions regarding their participation in Christ's mission to the world. These convictions and related spiritual practices ultimately gave shape to Bethlehem's distinctive spirituality — a missional spirituality. Prior studies of early Bethlehem have described the mission theory and praxis emanating from the congregation; they have not, however, adequately explained the connection of the community's missional purpose to the fertile spiritual life of the congregation. Other studies have examined

Bethlehem's early religious life but without serious consideration of the way spiritual practices undergirded Bethlehem's missional identity. By investigating the ways varied spiritual practices of the community expressed and reinforced its missional outreach, this study has sought to contribute to a process of bridging a gap in the literature between studies which have examined Bethlehem's mission theory/praxis and those which have probed the internal dynamics of the community in the mid-eighteenth century.

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## **Abraham in Narrative Worldviews: Doing Comparative Theology through Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Turkey**

George Bristow (graduated 2015)

**ABSTRACT:** This study has implications for the fields of contextual missiology, interfaith comparative theology and biblical interpretation in Islamic contexts. Many approaches to Abrahamic dialogue do not grapple with the Abrahamic texts of Genesis and the Qur'an in enough detail for meaningful comparison. In this thesis I introduce and utilise a model for comparing particular Biblical and Qur'anic narratives, along with their use by Christians and Muslims respectively. This approach builds on the tight connection between narrative and worldview to enable theological comparison of these distinct but related worldviews. The Biblical/Christian worldview categories of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation are juxtaposed with Qur'anic/Muslim categories of Tawhid (Oneness of God), Prophethood, and Afterlife in three sets of polarities in order to catalyse deeper comparison. In the main body of the study I examine separately the Genesis Abraham narrative, the New Testament treatments of Abraham, the Qur'anic Abraham stories, and finally the use of Abraham by Turkish Muslims through analysis of field research interviews. This prepares the way for comparing Christian and Muslim worldviews as expressed in their respective uses of Abraham. Using the central themes developed through the discrete studies and the polarities generated by my narrative-worldview model, I undertake a theological comparison of Abraham in Christian and Muslim worldview. This yields evidence that, despite some common ground, the worldviews diverge deeply in each of the major polarities. The beginning of the story, with God as the sovereign creator of all things, and humanity entrusted with a particular set of responsibilities as God's special creation, and the end of the story, with resurrection, judgment and heaven and hell, have significant common elements when looked at broadly. But the rest of the story, making up almost the entire sweep of the Biblical narrative, is vastly different. Looking through the lens of Abraham narratives, the two worldviews have little in common in terms of either plight or solution. Despite some limited overlap, Abraham stands in a different story of God's relationship to humanity.

**Dr George Bristow lives in Istanbul, where he serves as coordinator of a theological training network for Turkish Christians and as a research fellow for the Institute for the Study of Religion in the Middle East.**

## **Towards a Theological Engagement with an Area of Multiple Deprivation: The Case of the Cornwall Estate**

Mike Pears (graduated 2015)

**ABSTRACT:** The question addressed by this study is as follows: In areas where there are deep-rooted patterns of multiple deprivations, what are the implications for the theology and practice of mission afforded by a theological perspective on particular human social space? The study is in the field of contextual missiology and takes a practical theological approach to the subject of 'place'. By drawing on theological and social scientific understandings, the study presents a tri-spatial conception of place in terms of created-place, normative-place and Jesus-Space (or redemptive-place). Redemptive-places, which can be understood in terms of a hybrid- or third-place, are presented as a potential way of understanding how mission might be conceived of as participating in the transformation of places. The focus of research is on a specific, bounded, residential area situated on the southern edge of a British city. Like many such 'estates' built from the mid-1930s onwards by the British government as part of a major nation-wide slum clearance programme, the Cornwall Estate has experienced chronic and serious multiple deprivations. Qualitative research methods are employed as a way of investigating the material, social, and spiritual spatial characteristics of the Cornwall Estate with a view to understanding the nature of the relationship between the social-spatial arrangements of power and the lived experiences of deprivation. Ethnographic methods are then used in two particular case studies to investigate the boundary characteristics that describe the normative arrangement of place within the estate (as either 'hard' or 'soft') and the possibility of transforming these spatial arrangements through the formation of redemptive places. The conclusion includes a series of proposed 'mission practices' which specifically engage with the hard boundary characteristics that sustain strong binary arrangements of place, as a way of formulating hopeful responses to deeply-entrenched patterns of urban deprivation and marginalisation.

**Revd Dr Mike Pears is the director of *Urban Life* and is missions tutor at Bristol Baptist College. He has been involved in urban ministry, mission, and church planting since 1983 in a variety of contexts.**

## **The Self-Enclosing God: John Chrysostom and Ephrem Syrus on divine self-limitation as gift of love in Genesis 1–3**

Rosa Hunt (graduated 2015)

**ABSTRACT:** In this thesis I study four fourth-century patristic texts based on the creation and fall accounts in Genesis 1–3. Two of them are in Syriac, poetry and a commentary by Ephrem Syrus, and two are in Greek, two sets of sermons or homilies by John Chrysostom. I demonstrate through a close engagement with the texts in their original languages that Ephrem and Chrysostom read Genesis 1–3 through the interpretive lens of divine self-limitation in order to arrive at a deeper meaning of the text for their generation. In other words, their understanding that God freely chooses to limit Himself in Word and deed out of His saving love for us was a key factor in how they read their Bible, understood its message, and used it apologetically in their theologically fraught context. The research shows that the two authors, who can be taken as representative of the Eastern and Western Syrian church in the fourth century, used the doctrine of divine self-limitation to help them exegete the creation and fall accounts in a complex way that cannot be easily characterised according to the traditional fault lines of allegorical, typological, or literal-historical, while remaining within the discipline of a Nicene orthodoxy. I argue that the same interpretive lens of divine self-limitation can be used to great profit in our own generation by people of faith who want to read and apply the Bible to their lives without compromising their intellectual integrity.

**Revd Dr Rosa Hunt is the minister of a bilingual (Welsh and English) Baptist chapel in Tonteg, near Pontypridd, South Wales, and a part-time tutor at South Wales Baptist College in Cardiff.**

## **‘The Hand of Sincere Friendship’: The Responses of Baptists in the United States to Nazi Anti-Semitism and the Persecution of the Jewish People, 1933-1948**

Lee Spitzer (graduated 2016)

**ABSTRACT:** Through a thorough and close reading of the primary source documents produced by Baptist denominations and their periodicals, this dissertation addresses the following historical research question: How did Baptists in the United States relate to Jews and respond to Nazi anti-Semitism and their persecution of the Jewish people during the turbulent era of 1933 through 1948 (from Hitler’s rise to power to the establishment of Israel)? Were Baptists in the United States silent while the Nazis persecuted the Jews and killed millions of people during the course of the Holocaust? This work demonstrates that Baptist denominations in the United States did express varying degrees of opposition and protest against anti-Semitism in general and to the Nazi campaigns against the Jews in particular. Baptist organisations passed dozens of resolutions and statements that were shared with thousands of congregations, published in newspapers, and distributed to politicians. A comprehensive exploration of articles published in five Baptist newspapers and periodicals indicates that Baptists in the United States had access to a great deal of information about the Nazi persecution of European Jewry. Throughout the United States, Baptist national denominations, state conventions, city societies, local churches, and individual clergy passed resolutions, conducted protests, and offered theological arguments for opposing Nazi totalitarianism and anti-Semitism. The historical records of the largest Baptist denominations in the United States are explored in detail (the Northern Baptist Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.). This study situates the African-American Baptist response within the wider context of that community’s struggle for civil rights. Smaller Baptist denominations and alliances (the German Baptist Conference, the Swedish Baptist General Conference, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, the Seventh Day Baptists, and Baptist evangelicals) are also surveyed. Baptists in the United States expressed their convictions through a global fellowship, the Baptist World Alliance. Its responses to anti-Semitism, the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust are examined. Particular attention is paid to Baptist ministries directed at the Jewish community, and to the prophetic ministries of selected female leaders, including the Christian Friendliness missionaries of the



Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Woman's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention. The ministry of Jacob Gartenhaus is contrasted to other influential Southern Baptist leaders, who displayed varying degrees of anti-Semitism. Baptists responded to the Nazi persecution of the Jews in light of classic Baptist theological concepts. Key Baptist convictions such as soul liberty and the separation of church and state, in combination with two subsidiary theological insights – personality (the infinite value of all humans because they have a spiritual nature, a premise denied by totalitarian regimes) and racialism (a term employed to denote the topic of race relationships and specifically, discrimination against Jews, African-Americans, and Japanese-Americans), were applied to counter Nazi anti-Semitism. Furthermore, this study contributes to scholarly analysis of the Baptist responses to the Zionist movement and the establishment of Israel.

**Revd Dr Lee B. Spitzer serves as the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA.**

## **A Transformative Moment: Emerging Adult Faith Development in Conversation with the Theology of James E. Loder**

Gilbert Dueck (graduated 2017)

**ABSTRACT:** This dissertation seeks to engage the question of faith development among emerging adults from a descriptive practical theological perspective. This involves an engagement with the question of how human and faith development interact and culminates in a robust theological account of both the ‘ordinary’ of human development and the ‘extraordinary’ of Christian transformation. These questions are engaged with the Canadian Mennonite Brethren context in view.

The starting point is the much-discussed ‘delayed adulthood’ thesis and the adverse effect many believe it is having on faith retention in many Western contexts. This thesis is best conceptualised by Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood which I offer as a useful articulation of the coming-of-age experience in many Western contexts. I then offer a summary and critique of the now standardised assessment of religious decline within this demographic.

The discussion of faith retention among emerging adults raises the question of how to account for the way faith changes over time. Fowler’s Faith Development Theory is engaged as the still dominant structural account of this phenomenon, particularly as a way of understanding the relationship between faith development and developmental psychology. Fowler’s theory, while illuminating, identifies faith as a species of human meaning-making and this is problematic for any understanding of faith that takes its object (i.e. God) as ultimately significant.

I introduce James Loder’s theology of transformation as a way of accounting for the gaps in Fowler’s theory as well as situating faith development within a larger theological context. Loder’s theological perspective offers a vision that is not restricted to human meaning-making within a socially constructed environment. Rather, all human change demonstrates a pattern of death and resurrection as individuals and communities encounter both the threat of ultimate futility and despair as well as the gracious promise of new life through the Spirit of God. This understanding of transformation is ‘thick’ enough to include both gradual incremental change as well as decisive convictional experience and offers

promise for articulating a theologic for all aspects of the Christian journey. This is especially important for ecclesial contexts that are characterised by a 'conversionism' that struggles to account for the 'ordinary' alongside of the 'extraordinary' movements of God's Spirit in the context of a human life.

**Dr Gilbert Dueck serves as Academic Dean at Columbia Bible College in British Columbia, Canada.**

## Juan de Valdés (c. 1490-1541) in Light of his Religious Background

Manuel Martínez Ortega (graduated 2017)

**ABSTRACT:** This dissertation explores the teachings of Juan de Valdés, analysing his influences and personal message. It focuses on his writings, comparing its contents with religious currents and writings that affected his religious background. This research pursues an individual understanding of Valdés, who, like his Spanish Pre-Tridentine environment, has suffered tensions from sensibilities and confessional biases for centuries. Valdésian research has steadily evolved, clarifying significant aspects of his biography and writings. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, authors have discovered important conceptual and textual dependences, particularly in his first work, *Dialogue of Doctrine*. While Valdés' eclecticism has been recognised, no assessment has been done evaluating his theological dependence or his personal, intentional message. The analysis of Valdés' writings and contemporary documents involves the crossroads of undeveloped, unsystematised religious currents, pressures of persecution, and the use of common values and texts. Since the twentieth century, most research has defended a single-face interpretation of Valdés: Erasmian, Pre-Tridentine Catholic, *Alumbrado*, or Lutheran perspectives.

This investigation focuses on Valdés' writings, accounting for, but not overemphasising, historical circumstances. We have recognised the complexity of our personage, and the analysis has confirmed Valdés' eclecticism: Valdés discriminated his influences and used his sources according to his own intentional message. The implications of Valdés' *Converso* lineage and his *Alumbrado* participation have enlightened the internal struggles and tenets of Valdés' thought. Throughout his writings, his spirituality of affections, his spiritual emphasis and Biblicism, and his radical commitment and dependence on God remain steady. Conversely, the centrality of Christ or the eternal perspectives of salvation reveal his permeability and assimilation from *Converso-Alumbrado* environments into a Christian mindset. The axis of Valdés' message was the experience of entering the Kingdom of God. His spiritual advice, his theological reflection, and his Biblical hermeneutics were structured according to that experience. Marked by Pedro R. Alcaraz, influenced by Spanish Erasmism, and adopting a Lutheran soteriology, Valdés defended a sovereign God-intervention that

changed man's disposition and brought him into a committed love-relationship with God.

The conclusions emerge from two basic sources: The analysis of *Dialogue of Doctrine* in light of Valdés' background and his use of Erasmus and Luther in that writing, and the analysis of Valdés' freer and diverse writings in Naples, amidst friends and followers.

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## **Praying Like the Catholics? Enriching Canadian Mennonite Brethren Spirituality through Spiritual Direction, Lectio Divina, and the Taizé Community**

Andrew Dyck (graduated 2017)

**ABSTRACT:** In this dissertation, I address the question of how one group of Protestant evangelicals — Mennonite Brethren in Canada — can draw organically on spiritual practices coming from other Christian traditions. This question is significant in light of the discussions among North American evangelicals about the appropriateness of adopting spiritual disciplines from Christians, such as Catholics, whom Protestants have at times viewed with criticism and suspicion. Seeking an enriched spiritual life, some Mennonite Brethren have learned the previously unfamiliar practices of spiritual direction, lectio divina, and Taizé singing, while other Mennonite Brethren have criticised this development. In keeping with the academic discipline of Christian spirituality, I employ an interdisciplinary methodology consisting of a comparative inter-textual analysis based on a close reading of texts describing experiences and practices that Christians associate with their life with God. Drawing on historical and contemporary resources, I provide a critical historical survey of Mennonite Brethren life. That survey — unique to this study — shows that conversion, scripture reading, and singing have been central features of Mennonite Brethren spirituality, even as the experiences, practices, and theological understandings associated with these three continually developed after the denomination's founding in 1860. I go on to examine founding and contemporary expressions of spiritual life within the Ignatian tradition, the Benedictine tradition, and the Taizé Christian Community because these are like roots for the spiritual direction, lectio divina, and Taizé singing being practised by some Mennonite Brethren. In light of the ways that these practices and their sources have influenced Mennonite Brethren, I consider how these three practices can be organically appropriated, so that Mennonite Brethren can honour and live faithfully to their historical past — as the other three Christian traditions and communities do — while also remaining open to new possibilities for living richly in the life of the Spirit. It is my contention that this investigation can help Christian groups engage with each other's diverse practices and traditions in ways that will foster unity within the Body of Christ.

**Dr Andrew Dyck is Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality and Pastoral Ministry for Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Canada.**

## Book Reviews

Myra Blyth & Andy Goodliff (eds), *Gathering Disciples. Essays in Honour of Christopher J. Ellis* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 268 pages. ISBN: 978-1498231572

When I was growing up in a Baptist family, my mother always referred to her hymn book (the *Baptist Hymn Book*, 1962) as her ‘prayer book’. These essays in honour of Christopher Ellis reflect in various ways on the place of hymns and songs as expressions of Baptist beliefs and theology, taking the place that the liturgy has in other denominations. This text takes the contributions of fourteen Baptist authors, who each take one of Ellis’ hymns as a take-off point from which to reflect on their own concerns for various aspects of Baptist life, identity, belief, and mission. The result is a rich theological resource of reflection and exploration of Baptist expressions of faith, discipleship, and discernment of the mind of Christ. As we might expect there is variety in these approaches, some more theological and some more practical and reflective, but each part adds to the whole, and is a fitting tribute to Ellis’ own strengths and commitment to the ministry and mission of the Church.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper feature as central aspects of worship and as a central feature in our understanding of mission. We are encouraged to see the significance of baptism beyond ourselves as we become part of a bigger narrative, revealing something of a continuing incarnation — being with Christ in his mission in and for the world. In the Lord’s Supper we celebrate our covenant with God and with each other and this extends to ecclesial communion, a move toward dialogue and shared mission with our fellow Christians in the wider church. Mission is central in many of these essays and it is fitting that the final chapter reflects on Ellis’ hymn *Missionary God*, written for the bicentenary of the BMS in 1992.

I conclude with a quotation from one of Ellis’ hymns, *Passover God* (447 in *Baptist Praise and Worship*), not included in this book, but which sums up the central thread of these essays:

We are your people, still called to a promised land,  
called for a purpose with Christ as the way;  
grant us commitment to wholeness and liberty,  
strength for the journey and grace for each day.

**Reviewed by John Weaver**

Jonathan Roach and Gricel Dominguez, *Expressing Theology: A Guide to Writing Theology that Readers Want to Read* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 151 pages. ISBN: 978-1498208703

In Hans Christian Andersen's story a child pointed out that the Emperor was not, in fact, wearing new clothes but was wearing no clothes at all! I wonder if this book will have a similar effect on much theological writing.

Jonathan Roach and Gricel Dominguez aim to 'spark a revolution' in how theologians express theology. They expose characteristics of writing which often 'dress' theological insights including poor writing, shallow writing and fear-based writing. Roach and Dominguez believe that theology should not be 'abstract', 'dull', 'dense' or 'remote', but rather that it should be 'engaging, compelling and beautiful'.

Following this rousing introduction, the remaining six chapters of the book contain practical advice on how to attempt to write theology which is true to these descriptors. They include topics such as authorship, sources, audience, writing techniques, the craft of writing and revising and editing. Each chapter is punctuated by opportunities for readers to respond by asking themselves reflective questions. In addition to the chapters are four letters (entitled 'epistles') to several audiences including undergraduates, post-graduates, and aspiring theological authors. These epistles contain down-to-earth, 'nitty-gritty' encouragements, warnings, and useful advice.

Roach and Dominguez, both academic librarians, birthed this book from their experiences as readers and writers. Between them they bring further perspectives from teaching theological writing and from editing.

This book raises interesting questions and dilemmas; for example, encouraging writing in the author's own voice and style. Potential conflict may arise with traditional conventions in academic writing. I found such questions were particularly well addressed in the 'epistles', recognising that writers have to work within certain parameters.

I recommend this book to those undertaking a piece of writing — whether they are students, academics, editors, publishers, those new to writing, or those who are established authors. It should not be confined to theological readers alone, since its perspectives and advice are relevant across academic disciplines, university faculties, and institutions concerned with publishing written material.

The authors advocate particular writing techniques and in this book model those admirably — their 'voices' are evident, the style is relaxed and the content is clear. They invite readers to engage and personally connect with the subject.



One of the marks of good writing, state the authors, is that the readers should continue to think after they have finished reading. In the spirit of that criterion, I say this is a good read.

**Reviewed by Christine Fleming**

Martin Luther, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas Day* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2017), 152 pages. ISBN: 978-1619709812

The year 2017 has seen a great deal of weighty Reformation material published. This little volume of Luther's Advent sermons offers a valuable insight into the Reformer's preaching and pastoral heart with which readers may be less familiar. The book commences with a short biographical sketch of Luther's life and proceeds to record six sermons on Gospel passages. The following are six particularly striking features of the sermons:

1. A not unexpected framing of the material against the background of abuses in what Luther considers to be the false church of the papacy.
2. A method of spiritual interpretation in which the preacher uncovers a layer of hidden or spiritual meaning in the text. Luther interprets Luke 21.25ff, for example, as follows: 'The sun is Christ, the moon is the church, the stars are Christians...' and so on. This allegorical approach to Scripture, which is rather strange to modern ears, locates Luther in the scholastic method of his age.
3. The prominence of the theme of grace in which Luther celebrates what God has done in sending his Son into the world and appeals consistently for faith in him.
4. A detailed examination of the doctrine of the virgin birth, which Luther subjects to careful scrutiny. Here he also exhibits a measure of 'sanctified imagination' as he envisages the young mother, with little preparation and help, in this most stressful of situations.
5. A demonstration of pastoral warmth. Perhaps it is customary to consider Luther as a polemical firebrand. In the biographical section he is quoted as saying, 'I cannot deny that I am more vehement than I should be...'. Nevertheless, in his handling of the birth narratives, the reformer's humanity and pastoral heart for his congregation shine through. He views the reference to 'swaddling clothes' in Luke chapter 2, for example, as an image of how Christ cares for his loved ones.

6. A rigorous exegetical focus. Luther's handling of the various texts reveals a close engagement with Scripture, which serves as a helpful reminder to the modern preacher to ensure that the Bible shapes preaching and not vice-versa.

In summary, providing we can make allowance for a fifteenth-century method of hermeneutics, these sermons are a delightful blend of the doctrinal and pastoral serving to illuminate the Advent message.

**Reviewed by Edwin Ewart**

Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 345 pages. ISBN: 978- 1602585706

Steven Harmon, who lectures at Gardner-Webb University in the USA, has, in recent years engaged with contemporary ecumenical theology, no doubt fuelled by his participation in the life and work of the Baptist World Alliance. His earlier work on *Baptist Catholicity* was important for Baptists in North America and this work, too, engages seriously with the ecclesial life and theology of other major Christian traditions and provides a further prompt for Baptists to engage with the wider Christian world, not least the Catholic and Anglican.

The book is, naturally, written from his North American perspective and does not always appreciate the way European Baptists have engaged in dialogue and action with other major Christian world communions. However, despite this, Harmon's book is a great tract, worth reading whatever part of the world we are currently domiciled in.

His vision is an impressive one. The opening chapter sets out his own involvement in the most recent Baptist-Catholic conversations and this chapter concludes with his call for Baptists to join with Catholics in a pilgrimage towards the ecumenical future. In opening up this call, he explores the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the ongoing dialogue about the meaning and practice of baptism amongst paedobaptist and believer-baptist traditions. His perspective is to encourage a new generation of catholic Baptist scholars. He goes on to draw insights from works by other Baptist scholars such as C. J. Ellis on worship, with a view to enhancing the place of Scripture in the liturgical life of Baptist communities. Through this, Harmon argues, a better sharing of the biblical story will be possible with other Christians. From this base he explores issues of Scripture and tradition and how revelation is transmitted to churches. Subsequent chapters explore the vexed question of

the apparent decline of Baptist denominationalism in the west, the process of reception and the importance of the ecumenical task of theology.

Harmon displays an impressive background of reading and his participation in international ecumenical dialogue means he is well placed to argue the case for Baptist enthusiastic participation in our common ecumenical future. This is a book well worth reading.

**Reviewed by Keith G. Jones**

Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *The English Protestant Churches since 1770: Politics, Class and Society* (Oxford: Peter Lang AG, 2017), 439 pages. ISBN: 978- 1787071780

Kenneth Hylson-Smith, one time Bursar and Fellow of St Cross College, Oxford, is well known in the English speaking world of church history for his monumental three volume *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*. This new book focuses on the engagement of English Protestants in issues of Politics, Class and Society. It is a work of detailed scholarship, as we would expect, but the balance is certainly weighted in favour of the English State church and with, what appears to this reviewer, the giving of undue weight to Anglican high churchmen in the east end of London, whilst the Rowntree Cliffords in West Ham are ignored. Important themes of slavery and social ills are covered, but the stance, especially by 'old dissent' (Baptist, Congregational, and Presbyterian) on issues such as universal education free of biased religious control is, by comparison, scantily treated. Hylson-Smith makes much of those in the political elite and their work in arguing for the abandonment of the slave trade and then slavery in the Empire, but finds no space to note the campaigning throughout the country by such as the Baptist missionary, William Knibb. On more contemporary issues, such as human rights and religious freedom, the noted work of Baptists in England goes without mention. John Clifford, J. H. Shakespeare, J. H. Rushbrooke, E. A. Payne, and D. S. Russell are virtually ignored.

Now, by numbers and influence, leaders of the State church and those working in slum parishes outmatched that of any of the free churches, individually, but in the late 1800s and until the Second World War, at least, there were those in the free churches who made significant impact on issues of politics and society, generally from within the 'class' of ordinary people, if not out of the higher echelons of society. This seems undervalued.

There are inconsistencies and errors in the book, which ought to have been weeded out by good sub-editing. Hylson-Smith quotes Rosie

Chadwick's excellent doctorate studying the free churches in Bradford, but he turns Rosie into a 'him' (p. 176). In a list of Free Church leaders on page 254, Dr John Clifford is given his doctorate, but J. H. Shakespeare, John Scott Lidgett and Robertson Nicholl are denied theirs.

This book needs supplementing by other authors more in tune with the Free Churches.

**Reviewed by Keith G. Jones**

Karen D. Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of our Lives* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2016), 232 pages. ISBN: 978-1426766473

This book is a primer on narrative pastoral care. Scheib sets out to provide a 'model of Christian pastoral care as a narrative, ecclesial, theological practice (NET)' (xi). Her interest is the church's responsibility 'to proclaim and embody the narrative of the sacred story of love' (xii). The pastoral task is to help shape good life stories and to bear witness to God's love in our lives. To this end, pastoral carers are encouraged to become 'story companions'.

Having introduced the idea of narrative pastoral care, in chapter 3 Scheib provides a 'Theology 101' in which she outlines various images of God – Liberator, Monarch, Spirit, amongst others — and suggests that we need to be aware of the embedded theological narratives within which individuals and communities operate. Chapter 4 discusses our invitation to become 'active and responsible agents of love' in community and chapter 5 explores practical essentials, such as listening and confidentiality. Chapter 6 discusses how narrative environments function and how stories develop over a lifetime. Using the analogy of textual exegesis, chapter 7 explores how a life story might be 'read'. Chapter 8 focuses on 're-storying in transition and trouble', drawing on theories of grief and loss. An afterword reminds us that we cannot become pastoral story companions without a commitment to spiritual formation for all concerned. At the end of the book useful exercises and questions for discussion are provided.

The idea of 'story companion' is a valuable one, and there is no doubt that it is the role of the pastoral carer to help those in distress find ways to change their own stories for the better. For Scheib, this means helping people to mature into coherent, open, authentic and truthful lives — an appropriate goal for most people. However, for some, this may be problematic or unrealistic; for example, those suffering from mental illness or addictions. For this reason, I find the concept of 'good' and 'bad' stories to be rather

simplistic and potentially moralistic. Who is to decide what a good story is, or when a life is ‘coherent’? More exploration of self-awareness on the part of practitioners and some discussion of mental illness and learning difficulties would have been useful.

This is a compassionate, rich, and stimulating book. Although aimed at pastoral practitioners, it is extensively researched with good bibliography, and so it will be useful in the seminary setting as well.

**Reviewed by Marion Carson**

Anthony R. Cross, *Useful Learning: Neglected Means of Grace in the Reception of the Evangelical Revival Among English Particular Baptists* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 533 pages. ISBN: 978-1498202558

In what ways are theological education and ideas of revival inter-linked? Does theological knowledge translate into wisdom which helps to develop evangelism and mission? These questions do not belong only to the present context. Anthony Cross argues that British Particular Baptists in the eighteenth century, moving from moderate Calvinism towards evangelical Calvinism, faced similar questions. In this process they benefitted from theological discussions, even debates, and from establishing Academies and Seminaries. Some of these institutions were short-lived, others, such as Bristol Academy, evoked something that is called ‘The Bristol Tradition’, which aimed to prepare ‘able and evangelical ministers’. Even if anti-intellectualism was not missing from the scene, the general approach, as Cross argues, was belief in ‘useful learning’, which wrestles with deep theological issues, goes back to Biblical languages, and finds expression in practical Christianity. ‘The knowledge of God – theology – is practical, otherwise it is not true theology.’ (xvi). However, ‘practical’ or ‘useful’ was not synonymous with ‘superficial’ or ‘only-doing-orientated’.

The author of *Useful Learning* does not only dwell on well-known figures, such as Andrew Fuller and William Carey, but introduces less known ministers and theologians, such as Benjamin Beddome, Alvery Jackson and many others, who are less known, at least beyond British borders. In addition, the reader finds fascinating chapters on John Fawcett and Robert Hall Sr. The volume, supported by impressive footnoting apparatus, helps to see the period under discussion as a dynamic one and guards against simplistic conclusions. Cross rightly says that ‘party lines’ between different types of Calvinists ‘were not as firmly delineated as many contemporary historians and theologians suppose’ (p. 153). The volume pays

careful attention to historical details, and yet provides insightful generalisations. The historical Baptist figures were courageous enough to think through ‘hard’ – even controversial – theological issues of sin, atonement, mission, Christian calling and character. Also, the spread of education overseas was a sign of revived evangelical energy. For example, Serampore College was established in 1818, nudged by Carey’s conviction that schools were effective means of spreading the Gospel (p. 418).

This scholarly written volume expands and deepens readers’ understanding about the role of theological study and networking, both formal and informal, and how this enhanced a shift towards evangelical Calvinism and the spread of revival ideas among the eighteenth century English Baptists.

**Reviewed by Toivo Pilli**

Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2015), 356 pages. ISBN 978-1433673757

The authors of *The Baptist Story* have undertaken an almost impossible task: to delineate the trajectory of historical and theological development of a worldwide movement called the Baptists. The challenge is overwhelming, as one may ask if there actually is a unified Baptist story to be captured into a book, or if there are, and will increasingly be, many ‘baptistic stories’ like pieces of a mosaic, which can be put together in different ways. In any case, here is a global survey of Baptists.

Over the last decades, similar projects include: Leon McBeth’s magnum opus *The Baptist Heritage* (1987); Bill Leonard’s *Baptist Ways* (2003), which points out Baptist identity markers; Robert Johnson’s *A Global Introduction to Baptist Churches* (2010), which follows a similar approach; David Bebbington’s *Baptists Through the Centuries* (2010), which creatively explores what major questions in wider society over the centuries required a Baptist response and how Baptists reacted.

Chute, Finn and Haykin have combined the chronological story with Baptist ‘big issues’ – both theological and social. This is a well written textbook and as such is a welcome addition to the family of similar volumes. Other volumes, figuratively speaking, tell the story in a suit and a tie, keeping their scholarly dignity. This volume invites students to sit on the grass under a tree, roll up their sleeves and it says: “Hey, I have something interesting to tell you!” The book makes use of biographical stories of Baptist historical

figures. Pictures and illustrative boxes in the text, questions for discussion, and selected lists for further reading indicate that the authors' aim is to present the material in a student-friendly manner.

However, the book is not only for those who take a course in Baptist history. It is an enjoyable read for everyone: scholars, pastors, and history-inclined church members alike. As a European I slightly regretted that the book was written from a rather Anglo-American perspective. For example, African and Asian aspects of the story were mentioned predominantly from a mission point of view. However, these areas have their own indigenous narrative to be told, and they cannot be defined only as objects for externally initiated mission efforts.

This is an engaging volume, a panoramic view of Baptist expansion over the four centuries. It should be commended for telling an honest story, which includes both bright episodes and shadows. As such, it is helpful for readers who want to learn Baptist history and, hopefully, learn *from* Baptist history. Nevertheless, on a more theoretical level, and without diminishing the value of this volume, the question remains: To what extent do 'global' narratives help us to see the multifaceted character of Baptists? Should there be more encouragement to write local or regional Baptist histories? Or, if the wider canvas still needs to be painted, what difference would it make if an African or Russian or Asian scholar would write a 'global' Baptist history?

**Reviewed by Toivo Pilli**

# Baptists, Jews, and the Holocaust

The Hand of Sincere Friendship

LEE B. SPITZER

Foreword by Reid Trulson



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We congratulate our former PhD student Lee B. Spitzer on the recent publication of the results of his PhD research.